아카데미 자식이
되었다
윤매미 판타지 장편소설

ACADEMY'S SECOND SEAT

– 아카데미 차석이 되었다 –

- VOLUME 3 -

-AUTHOR-
윤매미

[RAEI TRANSLATIONS]

CHAPTER 103
STUDENT COUNCIL ELECTION2 (1)

Typically, research labs were quiet.

There was hardly any chatter.

Everyone was too swamped and exhausted to chat.

However, this particular research lab was even quieter than the rest.

There were no sounds of footsteps or rustling papers, save for one individual.

“Ugh…”

This was Professor Gracie's lab.

Compared to other labs, it was almost empty, devoid of people or clutter.

The only thing present in this barren lab was an enormous pile of papers.

Gracie slouched dejectedly at her desk.

"I need an assistant…”

After becoming a professor, Gracie had tried fervently to recruit one.

However, the number of students who applied to be her assistant?

Zero.

Not a single one.

The potential teaching assistants knew all too well.

Joining Gracie's lab meant facing tremendous difficulties…

Why would they willingly enter Gracie's understaffed lab, when they knew they'd be swamped with work without any perks?

In other labs with more assistants, at least tasks were distributed.

But here, it was obvious that one would be overwhelmed without even the chance to leave work on time.

And it wasn't just the first-years who were reluctant.

Even the second and third-year students declined Gracie's offers.

By their second and third years, students had generally adapted to the academy's environment.

As a result, they saw no reason to join Gracie's new lab, especially when they could join more established professors.

"Should I try to lure in some freshmen…"

This year, Gracie was in charge of first-year students.

To be exact, she was teaching the top class of the first-years for practical magic.

The top class of practical magic was initially handled by Professor Cromwell.

Which meant Gracie had no choice but to take over.

While one might think that the top class should be managed by a more experienced professor, these were still first-year students.

Regardless of how exceptional they were compared to their peers, they were still novices.

Teaching them wasn't the issue.

However, recruiting them as teaching assistants was a different story.

Even the brightest among the first-year students were still just that – first years.

"Maybe I can just ask them for a little help with the paperwork…"

While first-year students might not be able to assist in the more complicated research, they could still handle routine paperwork.

Gracie glanced at a paper bag beside her and picked it up.

She opened the bag and began sifting through the papers inside.

These were documents detailing the entrance exam scores of first-year students and also listed the names of her students – those in the top practical magic class.

[

Practical Magic Class

Yuni Von Ristonia

Diark Verde

]

There were only two students in the top class.

And unfortunately, both were individuals she couldn't easily approach.

Yuni would never consider taking on the role of a teaching assistant, being the princess of the empire.

As for Diark…

"Why would a top student from a prestigious family even consider joining my lab?"

Diark is the sole heir of the Verdès family.

The Verdès family owns fertile farmland in the southern plains and has served under the empire for generations.

However, before Diark, the Verdès line hadn't produced any notable talents.

Given the prosperity brought by their fertile territories, the family never felt the need to excel.

Emerging from such an environment was their sole heir, Diark Verdès.

It was unlikely that such a cherished noble offspring, raised in luxury, would have any interest in joining her laboratory.

"Ugh…"

Gracie sighed deeply.

The new term had begun.

Freshmen had completed the entrance ceremony and were now officially part of the academy.

Now in my second year, I've started attending various new classes.

"Rudy, what's our next class?"

"Introduction to Dark Magic. It's Professor Robert's class."

Luna and I chatted as we walked toward the cafeteria.

Today marked the beginning of the new academic term, and there was much to discuss about our classes.

We exchanged information about which classes we liked, which professors taught well, and started planning potential changes to our schedules.

In our first year, we couldn't freely choose our class schedules, but from the second year onward, we had the freedom to customize them.

For instance, those in the Magic Department could choose which intermediate magic courses they wanted, including classes in magical tool creation, advanced rune studies, and practical magic applications, tailoring their classes according to their career path.

For me, I leaned towards dark magic and practical magic classes, while Luna focused on courses related to magical tools and runes.

Of course, there were other mandatory courses we had to sign up for - the general education courses.

While you'd choose general education courses based on personal interest, there was one crucial thing to consider: which classes had fewer assignments, easier exams, and more lenient professors.

Frankly, while general education courses were designed to broaden one's horizons, they shouldn't be the main focus.

As a student of the Magic Department, my main priority should be magic.

Dedicating too much time to general studies would only be detrimental.

So, Luna and I aimed to choose the ones that demanded the least amount of our time.

"Shall we go for 'Royal Politics' then?"

"Yeah, sounds good."

While Luna and I were deep in conversation on our way to the cafeteria, we noticed a commotion ahead.

"Sigh… Just because you were lucky enough to be born a noble, you think you can talk so much."

I frowned at the scene.

A male student, known as a commoner, stood defensively with a female student hiding behind him, confronted by a noble student.

And that commoner boy was someone I knew.

Letting out a sigh, my expression changed, and I began walking towards them, calling out to the commoner student.

"Kuhn, how have you been?"

Kuhn.

He was the guy I spoke to during the freshman entrance exam.

And here he was, already in a conflict with another student so soon into the new term.

Seeing my approach with a smile, Kuhn's face twisted in discomfort.

"Ugh…"

When I called Kuhn's name, the noble student facing him looked at me, his eyes widening in surprise.

"Ah… Rudy Astria…"

I cast a side glance at the girl hiding behind Kuhn.

It was Emily, Kuhn's childhood friend.

After briefly meeting her gaze, I turned back to Kuhn.

"Kuhn, don't you think we have some things to discuss?"

With that said, I smiled at the noble student standing opposite Kuhn.

“Can I take this guy with me for a moment?”

At that, he looked taken aback and nodded vigorously.

“Do as you wish! Please, take him!”

Hearing this, I turned my gaze to Kuhn.

“Let's grab a meal together.”

Hearing my invitation, Luna tilted her head and asked from behind me,

“Who is he?”

I gave a faint smile,

“A junior I've taken a keen interest in.”

With that, I led Kuhn and Emily to the cafeteria.

Luna took a seat beside me, while Kuhn and Emily settled down across from us.

As soon as they were seated, Emily bowed her head towards me,

“Thank you for saving me…”

“It’s nothing,”

I brushed off her gratitude and looked at Kuhn.

His black hair obscured his eyes, giving him a rather brooding appearance.

Directly, I posed my question to him,

“So, Kuhn, what have you decided about my proposal?”

Kuhn hesitated before speaking,

“You probably already know what I'm going to say.”

His words referred to our previous encounter.

I had approached Kuhn before and suggested that we work together in the student council.

He scoffed and walked away.

A clear rejection.

Yet, I had my reasons for asking again.

“Umm… I’m sorry,”

Emily began hesitantly,

“But what are you talking about?”

Emily was the reason.

During the freshman entrance exam, I had spoken only to Kuhn.

Even though I knew he would refuse, I decided to give it a shot.

As expected, he turned me down.

So I decided to bring it up again but in Emily's presence.

As I explained the situation to Emily, she turned to Kuhn with a smile,

“Kuhn?”

“I said no. I'm not doing it.”

“Kuhn???”

"I… I won't do it…”

The usually brusque and prickly Kuhn was visibly flustered when Emily pressured him.

To Kuhn, Emily was his greatest vulnerability, yet also his greatest strength.

They had grown up together in an orphanage and shared a bond that was both a deep friendship and a budding romance.

If it was Emily, he would inevitably relent.

After all, the only reason he was refusing was because of my noble status.

Luna watched their playful banter with a warm smile,

“You two seem really close. Hehe.”

Hearing this, Emily, who was busy glaring at Kuhn, glanced at Luna and replied with a light laugh,

“You two seniors also seem to have a good relationship!”

“Huh??”

“Hmm?”

Both Luna and I looked at Emily with bewilderment.

Emily's eyes widened in realization, her face showing a hint of regret,

“Oh… Were you two not…? I'm so, so sorry!!”

As Emily bowed her head in embarrassment, Luna waved her hands dismissively,

“No, no! There's no need to apologize. It’s fine.”

“Ah, so you are dating… or, not…?”

Emily's gaze darted between the two of us, her face filled with confusion.

At the training grounds on the outskirts of the academy.

Yuni strolled leisurely toward it.

"Why do the people I'm looking for always prefer such secluded places?"

Grumbling, Yuni stepped inside.

Inside, a man was focused on his sword practice.

"Hello?"

Yuni greeted the man with a warm smile.

Hearing her voice, the man turned his head.

"You're Evan, the top student of the second year, right?"

"I am Evan, yes. But who are you?"

In response to Evan's words, Yuni introduced herself politely.

"I'm Yuni Von Ristonia, a first-year student here."

And with a playful grin, she added,

"How about teaming up with me?"

CHAPTER 104
STUDENT COUNCIL ELECTION2 (2)

"In the North, every four years, a massive magical beast attacks the fortress. Significant support is provided from the center, and our Liberion Academy also lends a hand."

During the second-year general elective class on Magical Beast Studies, the professor spoke.

"These beasts possess no rationality and are void of emotions like fear. Given that such an attack is anticipated this year, some of you might even be dispatched there."

As I listened to the professor, I tapped my desk with my fingers.

"Now, don't worry too much. The academy wouldn't put the students in too much danger. While students undoubtedly provide assistance, the main purpose of your involvement is to gain experience. After all, we have numerous veterans experienced with these beast attacks."

The professor seemed to think our grim expressions were due to fear.

He couldn't be more off the mark.

Noticing something was wrong, the professor glanced at the clock.

Class had already exceeded its scheduled time by over 15 minutes.

Seeing the students' frustrated faces, the professor chuckled,

"Ah, look at the time. My apologies, we'll conclude today's lesson here."

At his words, a collective sigh of relief spread throughout the class.

On the first day, we already had an extended lecture.

"This just won't do…”

I mumbled to myself.

I contemplated dropping this course and taking another elective.

Besides the Royal Politics course that Luna and I planned to sign up for, there were a few other electives to consider.

But this one just didn't seem right.

After all, my real opponents aren't monsters; they're people.

There's no point in learning extensively about monsters.

With that thought, I began to walk.

The afternoon following the end of the class was bathed in the gentle warmth of spring.

However, I had an errand to run.

I exited the Academy and headed towards a certain bakery.

"Ah, you're here?"

Rie, sipping her tea, greeted me at the bakery.

"Why meet outside? Couldn't we have just met inside the academy?"

The student council presidential elections were gradually approaching, and it was time to start preparing.

While sipping her tea with a sly smile, Rie responded,

"This place is delicious, right? Discussing matters over something tasty might lead to better ideas."

This was the bakery where Rie and I had tea after school.

Although we didn't have tea that time, I recalled the delightful snacks we had enjoyed.

I took a seat opposite Rie.

"Do we even need 'better ideas'?"

Frankly, there wasn't much to worry about for the upcoming election.

There weren't any second-year students capable of running, and with Rie's reputation, the student council president's position was practically guaranteed.

She smirked,

"True. So, do you dislike having tea with me? Or are you planning to pick a fight?"

"I apologize. I'll just quietly have my tea."

I yielded, wilting under Rie's playful tease.

Rie had decided to become the vice president, but I never saw her as someone subordinate to me.

If Rie had truly run for the student council presidency, even I wouldn't be certain of victory.

But Rie stepped back out of consideration for me.

"So, when should we get the recommendations from the professors?"

"It's easy to get the recommendation letters. Just get them from Professor Robert and Professor Mcguire. I'll take care of the rest."

"What about the other student council members?"

"For the first year, that guy you mentioned, Kuhn, and a couple others should do. For higher positions, it's best to go with familiar faces like Locke and Luna. Luna has her teaching assistant duties, so she might be busy, but it's always better if someone we know fills the higher roles."

I was comforted by Rie's confident attitude.

It seemed she had already thought through all the parts I was still wondering about.

While we were on the topic of second-year students, Rie suddenly clapped her hands and asked,

"Speaking of which, why hasn't Yeniel come back?"

"Huh?"

Yeniel hasn't come back?

Caught off guard by the unexpected question, my expression turned bewildered.

I hadn't thought about Yeniel at all.

She wasn't the type to stand out much anyway.

Plus, since Astina had been overseeing matters related to Yeniel, I hadn't paid her much mind.

"You don't know either? I thought you'd know something."

Could she still be with the Rebels?

Or something else…

Seeing my worried face, Rie sighed.

"Maybe I shouldn't have mentioned it. If anything had happened, Astina would have told us. Since we haven't heard anything, let's just wait a bit longer."

"Mmm…"

Despite Rie's words, I couldn't shake off the unease.

Still, Yeniel, being a former assassin from the Rebels, I expected her to return somehow.

But when I thought of the leader of the Rebels, I couldn't help but feel anxious.

Noticing my frown, Rie waved her hands dismissively.

"Let's leave that topic. I've been curious about something else."

"What are you curious about?"

Rie then leaned forward, giving me a probing look.

“Is Yuni still flirting with you?”

“…Flirting?”

Describing Yuni's actions towards me as 'flirting' made me chuckle.

Of course, Yuni has blonde hair*, but that's hardly relevant here.

"You said she confessed and you turned her down. So why does she keep sticking around you?"

"I'm not sure about that either. I'm actually more curious."

The fact that Yuni had confessed to me.

Everyone at the academy knew about it.

It was bound to spread since the confession took place in front of so many people.

“Stay away from her. She's really shady and weird. Never, ever, EVER! get close to her,”

Rie warned me about Yuni with great emphasis.

“But she's your family…”

“Oh my, what does being family have to do with anything?”

Just as she was about to respond, someone suddenly interrupted from behind.

I turned to see a beaming Yuni.

Rie jumped up from her seat, startled.

“Why are you here?”

“It’s not like I can’t be here. Right, Rudy?”

Yuni glanced at me cheekily.

“Well, I suppose so, but…”

Rie's brow furrowed.

“Wait, Rudy, are you siding with her?”

“I’m not really taking sides. She just…”

"It's just stating the obvious, right, Senior?"

Yuni interrupted with a teasing tone.

“Ugh…”

Rie clenched her fist, glaring at me, while Yuni watched with a mischievous grin.

However, Yuni then changed her tone, clapping her hands,

“I didn’t come here to discuss that. I have something else to say.”

Rie narrowed her eyes, giving Yuni a displeased look.

"What do you want now? If you're heartbroken, stay in your room and cry like a tragic heroine. Why do you keep showing up?"

"Mind your own business. This isn't about you. What are you to him? His lover?"

“Lover?!”

Caught off guard by Yuni’s words, Rie stepped back hesitantly.

“I might like him, but what are you to him? Nothing, right?”

Yuni’s rapid-fire questions clearly flustered Rie.

I stood up, approaching Yuni.

Without holding back, I thumped Yuni on the head.

Thump!

"Ow!"

Yuni clutched her throbbing head, tears forming in her eyes, and looked up at me in disbelief.

“Senior?”

I frowned at her.

“What are you doing? If you came to cause trouble, leave."

“But…”

Seeing her hesitation, I snapped,

“If you won't leave, then we will.”

I walked over to Rie and grabbed her wrist. “Come on.”

“Wait, what?”

As I led Rie towards the exit, Yuni suddenly grabbed Rie's other wrist, stopping us.

"Don't go!"

I responded firmly,

“We’re leaving.”

“Please stay!”

“We’re going.”

Yuni and I began to pull on Rie’s arms in a tug-of-war fashion.

“Ow! Why are you suddenly doing this with me in the middle?”

Caught in between, Rie's arms were being yanked from both sides.

With a quick tug, I pulled Rie towards me.

“Ah!”

In doing so, Rie stumbled into my embrace.

I steadied her, our eyes meeting.

“Are you okay?”

“Huh?”

She appeared a bit dazed but didn’t seem hurt.

I gently let go of her and we continued walking forward when Yuni's voice rang out.

“I'm sorry!”

I turned to face Yuni, who had raised her voice.

“I apologize! Please, just hear me out for a moment!”

Yuni said with a somewhat embarrassed look.

I let go of Rie's wrist and crossed my arms, staring intently at Yuni.

“Go on.”

“I mean…”

Her voice trailed off as she cast a frustrated glance at me, and I couldn't help but see a resemblance in her expression to Rie's.

I had to suppress a chuckle, but I kept my stern demeanor.

If I showed weakness now, I'd end up being pushed around by Yuni.

I waited for her to continue.

"I didn't want to bring this up like this, but… um…"

Her gaze dropped, and she murmured something under her breath before looking back at me.

"I'm planning to run for student council president."

"…What?"

I raised an eyebrow at her sudden announcement.

She's considering the role of student council president? As a first-year?

It wasn't against the academy's rules for a first-year to run, but it was unconventional.

While the academy prided itself on its liberal environment, there were still traditions.

Typically, a second-year student would run for president.

On the rare occasions that a first-year did run, their chances of winning were slim.

"I have a strategy to win, the right people to help me, and I'm confident,"

Yuni said with determination.

"But if you, Rudy, were to date me, I won't run. If I don't enter the race, it would be much easier for you to secure the president's position."

With that, Yuni extended her hand towards me, flashing a captivating smile.

"So, what do you say?"

CHAPTER 105
STUDENT COUNCIL ELECTION2 (3)

“I don’t need that.”

I glared arrogantly at Yuni.

“You can't beat me.”

Hearing that, Yuni smirked.

“Is that so? From what I see, I think otherwise.”

Yuni responded before heading towards the entrance.

"Well, if you change your mind, come see me anytime. I can give someone like you a couple of chances."

I watched as Yuni's figure receded towards the entrance.

Then, turning to Rie standing beside me, I smiled playfully.

"Looks like things are about to get busy, huh?"

Rie stared intently at me, posing a question.

"Why… did you refuse her offer?"

"Am I crazy? Why would I accept such a proposal?"

It was an obvious choice.

I wasn’t entirely sure of the exact reason Yuni wanted to date me, but it was clear she had some political motives.

It made no sense to accept an offer with such blatant intentions.

I might have considered it if she had been honest about what she wanted.

But accepting an offer without knowing her real intent was foolish.

And there was another reason I declined: Rie.

Rie had given up the position of student council president for me, choosing to be the Vice President instead.

We never explicitly stated a hierarchy between us, but it's obvious what it would look like to the public.

It was a risky move for Rie, someone who aspires to be the next Emperor.

If rumors spread about Yuni dating me in such a situation, it could jeopardize Rie's standing.

With her younger sister being my lover – an equal partnership – and Rie working under me, it would surely damage her reputation.

Rie trusted me.

She trusted me enough to take on the role of Vice President.

Accepting Yuni's offer just to get an easy path to the presidency would be betraying Rie's trust and expectations.

I have to earn that position with my own efforts.

It's the least I can do to repay Rie's trust.

Although the Emperor had asked me to stop any fights between the two, this couldn't be helped.

It wasn't a petty feud.

If someone challenges me, they need to be put in their place.

Seeing my smile, Rie nudged me slightly.

"So, why did you refuse again?"

Not wanting to explain everything in detail, I joked in a light-hearted tone.

"She's not my type."

“…What?"

"She's too childish. I don't want to date someone like that."

Rie looked at me, seemingly bewildered.

Then, she hesitantly asked,

"So… what is your type?"

"Huh?"

I was only joking earlier, but her serious reaction caught me off guard.

"Uh… I haven't given it much thought?"

"You must have a rough idea, right?"

"Is that important?"

As I tilted my head inquisitively, Rie answered with a stern face.

"It is."

"Uh…”

After a moment's hesitation, I spoke.

"Like a 'virtuous wife*'?"

"What?"

"Kind, wise, beautiful… something like that?"

Upon hearing that, Rie chuckled.

“Like me?”

“…”

I wanted to tease her, but it wasn't entirely wrong.

I did think Rie would make a good wife.

“Hehe, I am quite perfect, aren’t I?”

Seeing Rie puffing up with pride, I instantly regretted my words.

As time passed, the student council president election applications were closed.

There were two candidates: my name and Yuni’s.

I quickly scanned the list of members in Yuni's proposed student council.

Two names stood out: Diark Verdes and Evan, the top students from the first and second years, respectively.

I wasn’t surprised by Diark, knowing his ambitious nature.

But seeing Evan's name puzzled me.

Why did Evan join Yuni's student council?

Why did Yuni invite Evan to the council?

These questions quickly vanished from my mind.

I soon realized Yuni's motive for including Evan, as well as her strategy.

Yuni aimed to divide and conquer.

As I walked around the academy, I overheard whispers about me.

"Just how power-hungry are those nobles?"

"Aren’t those guys set for life even after graduating from the academy?"

"It's always the ones who have everything who want even more."

Yuni and Evan shared something in common.

Evan, despite being the top student, was a commoner.

And Yuni, while the second princess, was further down the line of succession.

On the other hand, our council had Rie and me. Although I had been overshadowed in the line of succession, I was gaining public support.

Plus, Rie was already being heralded as a potential future emperor, showcasing great promise.

We already held significant power and influence, which in turn, made it hard for us to gain the empathy of the people.

Logically, capable and influential people should lead the student council, but votes often aren't driven by logic.

Yuni's council exploited this.

This was the narrative they were pushing: our student council was already powerful.

Us taking over the student council would be a monopolization of power.

We already have everything, why hold onto the student council as well?

"Why should Rudy have all the power?"

Voices echoing such sentiments started spreading across the academy.

"Why is everyone being so unfair to Rudy?!"

Luna had heard various rumors while working as a teaching assistant, and she seemed deeply upset by them.

"Both Rudy and Rie earned their positions through hard work! They've worked even harder than the rest!"

Indeed, Rie and I had put in immense effort to be where we are today.

Asking us to step down from the student council election just because of our current positions, felt rather extreme.

I let out a sigh,

“That's how the public sees us; there’s not much we can do about it right now…”

“But still…”

As Luna’s voice began to rise, someone suddenly covered her mouth.

"Mmph…!"

Turning around, I saw Ena holding her hand over Luna's mouth, while Riku stood beside them.

Ena spoke softly,

"There are many people around."

Many people were in the cafeteria right now.

Speaking so openly like this is risky.

"It's unfair, but what can we do?"

Ena said as she placed a tray next to Luna.

"That's just how it is these days."

she added.

"What do you mean?"

Luna tilted her head, looking at Ena.

"Recently, the opinion on The Rebels has been favorable. Both inside and outside the academy…"

I nodded, recalling the stories I had heard from Rie.

The reasons why such an atmosphere could form were largely due to The Rebels.

According to Rie, Yuni's recruitment of Evan was also for this reason.

"The Rebels claim that they want to break the system where only the powerful monopolize everything… It seems many have embraced that idea."

The academy wasn't just for the nobility.

Surprisingly, many commoners were present.

Of course, these commoners were children of wealthy merchants and the like.

However, it's difficult for them to achieve a noble's status.

Merely having wealth doesn't grant you a spot among the nobles.

It requires ability — in magic, swordsmanship, or politics — to rise above one's station.

The class limitations.

The Rebels targeted this frustration.

Nobles monopolize power, and the higher-ranking nobles hoard it even more.

Therefore, this system should be overturned.

That was the logic of The Rebels.

I was bewildered.

A position earned through hard work, maintained through continuous effort, and yet they talk about monopolization of power?

While I don't particularly understand, not everyone actually agrees with their logic.

Some might feign agreement for their own gain, while others might genuinely agree with that perspective.

It's an unavoidable situation.

The real issue is that this sentiment cannot be ignored in the current elections.

Evan, a commoner, managed to outshine the Royal princess and a duke’s offspring, securing the top rank.

To the commoners, Evan was nothing short of a hero.

On the other hand, Yuni represented the face of the noble faction.

If the Astria family was at the heart of the nobility, then Yuni was its face.

Even if Yuni didn’t hold much sway among the noble faction, she was indispensable to them.

Her presence validated their cause.

She was the only figure within the noble faction who could potentially occupy the emperor's seat.

This fact earned Yuni the support of many in the noble faction for the student council elections.

To some within the noble faction, I seemed like a traitor, and there seemed to be a lingering resentment toward that.

Yuni's student council received support from both the noble faction and the commoners.

However, our faction didn’t have such a solid base of supporters.

We seemed to have taken a somewhat naive approach to politics.

Even if Rie tried to assure me with a smile that everything would be okay, I couldn't

help but worry.

“So, what are you all planning to do?”

Ena asked, looking at me.

Both Ena and Riku, having known me for some time, wore expressions of concern.

I responded quietly to the concerned Ena.

“I’ve been considering a few things, but I haven’t come to a plan of action yet.”

Luna then looked at me and smiled.

“Rudy can do it! Especially with Rie by his side. If there’s any way I can help, I’ll give it my all.”

“Thank you, Luna.”

For now, the responsibility Rie entrusted to me was to carry on with the election campaign as usual and not to be fazed by this situation.

I did my best to fulfill the tasks Rie had asked of me.

In terms of politics, she had always been a step ahead of me.

She had managed to overcome the challenges of various factions in the Royal Palace and confidently forge her own path.

Given the trust Rie had in me, I decided to trust and wait for her in return.

While doing the best I could…

Rie was on her way to the library with a book in hand, as Rudy and Luna had proposed they study together today.

Although the student council elections were important, she couldn't neglect her studies.

With midterms approaching right after the elections, it was important to prepare in advance.

While walking down the corridor, she spotted Yuni standing in the middle of the hallway, looking directly at her.

Instead of acknowledging her, Rie chose to walk past.

"Big sister."

Yuni's voice stopped Rie.

Without turning to face her, Rie replied,

“I have nothing to discuss with you.”

Yuni gazed at Rie with an arrogant look.

"Do you think just because you and senior are working hard, you can win this election?"

Ignoring her, Rie continued to walk.

However, Yuni continued,

"It's no big deal. Just hand over senior to me. If you give him to me, then…”

Hearing that, Rie stopped in her tracks and turned to face Yuni.

"The election? Let me ask you. Do you think we'd lose to someone like you, someone who isn't even taking this seriously?"

Rie took a step, then another, moving closer to Yuni, and added,

"And…,"

She said, her eyes burning with anger,

"Rudy isn't an object."

CHAPTER 106
STUDENT COUNCIL ELECTION2 (4)

“Luna, Rudy.”

Rie greeted us with a gentle wave as she entered the library.

“Oh, Rie, you're here?”

Luna cheerfully greeted Rie in response.

I also lifted my head slightly and raised a hand in greeting.

Rie looked at both of us and smiled warmly.

“You two are studying hard.”

“We have to. It's midterm season,”

I replied, shrugging as if it was only natural.

Rie chuckled.

“Are you aiming for second place again?”

I frowned at Rie’s joke.

“Don't you remember? I ranked first during the last final exam.”

“But you only tied for first place, right?”

I shot Rie a slightly annoyed look.

A tied first place is still a first place.

She felt the sting of my look, then turned her gaze to Luna, tilting her head slightly.

“By the way, Luna, shouldn't you be busy with your teaching assistant duties?”

“Oh, I've already finished all my tasks.”

“…You finished them all?”

Rie looked at Luna with a puzzled expression.

It was unheard of for a teaching assistant to finish all their work.

Normally, as soon as one task is completed, another one is assigned.

However, Luna claiming she had completed all her work was indeed curious.

“Did you just run away from your tasks?”

Rie questioned jokingly.

“No, not at all! First Rudy, and now you too, Rie?”

Luna responded, waving her hands in protest.

Seeing Rie's baffled expression, I spoke up in Luna's defense.

“Rie, it seems Luna is even more competent than I initially thought.”

“What do you mean?”

It turned out she genuinely had finished all her tasks.

I initially thought that, as a student, Luna was given less work.

But that wasn’t the case.

Luna's efficiency surpassed everyone else’s.

She wrapped up tasks at an incredible speed, to the point where she ran out of things to do, even outpacing the graduate teaching assistants.

Considering Luna's diligent nature, she wasn't the type to shirk her responsibilities.

This meant she had indeed completed all her assigned duties in the lab.

“Professor Mcguire must be over the moon,”

Rie remarked.

“More than the professor, the other teaching assistants are probably crying tears of joy,”

I chuckled, imagining the scene.

I understood now why Professor Mcguire was so fond of Luna, and why the other teaching assistants always spoke so highly of her.

Luna giggled modestly, brushing off the praise,

“Hehehe…”

But I had something more important I was wondering about,

“Rie, how are things with the student council elections?”

The current election campaign was proceeding with the help of others, and although we were maintaining our momentum, the situation had not changed much.

Yuni's student council had a solid support base that was becoming more consolidated.

The student council president election was just 10 days away.

Although the elections were just a few days away, Rie still hadn't done anything to counter Yuni.

However, Rie behaved confidently, as if everything was normal.

"You don't trust me? I'm a ‘Hyunmoyangcheo*’."

“…What?"

Hearing that, my eyes widened in surprise. Luna, who was standing next to me, tilted

her head and asked,

"What's a ‘Hyunmoyangcheo’?"

I inwardly groaned upon hearing the question.

‘Hyunmoyangcheo’ was not a word that existed in this world.

"Rudy briefly explained it to me. It's a term referring to someone wise, kind, and beautiful."

"Oh, that sounds nice."

I laughed awkwardly in response.

Originally, ‘Hyunmoyangcheo’ meant a good mother and a good wife.

Sure, it encompassed the notion of someone being wise and such, but that wasn't its precise definition.

I was taken aback to see the term being misinterpreted this way.

"Then I want to be a ‘Hyunmoyangcheo’ too! I'll work hard, Rudy!"

"No, no, that's not exactly…”

Flustered, I was about to wave my hands and clarify.

But I eventually decided against it.

After all, no one here really knew the true meaning of ‘Hyunmoyangcheo’.

It might be alright to let it slide and allow them to use it in this way.

Although hearing such a term directed at me did feel a bit odd.

Noticing my slightly uneasy expression, Rie gave a faint smile.

"Don't worry. I've deliberately been waiting for the elections to draw closer."

"Huh?"

I tilted my head in confusion.

Rie seemed to think my earlier bewilderment was about the upcoming election.

"Supporters gathered hastily often scatter just as quickly."

Rie smirked.

"Ugh… How did I end up in this mess?"

Kuhn leaned against the corridor wall, frowning deeply.

From the start, Kuhn never intended to join the student council.

Neither when he first entered the academy nor when Rudy suggested it.

If he joined, he'd have less time to spend with Emily.

Ever since he was young, Kuhn had made a promise: to protect Emily.

If he became part of the student council, his time with her would diminish, and he couldn't protect her as he wanted.

That's why he was against joining.

But what Kuhn hadn't considered…

"Wait… you get these benefits from the student council?"

"They offer this even after graduation?"

"No way!"

Instead of persuading Kuhn, Rudy approached Emily.

And Emily was easily convinced.

When she learned about the benefits and privileges of joining the student council and what lay in store for members afterward, her eyes widened in astonishment.

"Kuhn, we absolutely have to do this. There's no other option!"

Emily is usually quite reserved.

But she's always had a strong survival instinct; whenever money or benefits were involved, she'd become uncharacteristically eager.

Once Rudy successfully persuaded Emily, Kuhn found himself without a counterargument.

“What kind of person does that?”

Rudy Astria knew too much about him and Emily.

Watching Rudy speak to Emily, occasionally shooting him mischievous glances and smirking, Kuhn couldn't help but feel he'd been duped by a con artist.

But Rudy wasn’t the only one.

"Hey, aren’t you free?"

A few days after joining the student council, Kuhn was summoned by Rie.

"Make this potion for me. Once you're done, tell me. I'll let you know what you have to do next."

Kuhn looked at the vial in his hand. It was the potion that Rie had instructed him to make.

He sighed deeply, leaning against the wall, and glanced down the hallway.

From afar, he spotted Diark Verdès, chatting with a few others as they approached.

Kuhn took another deep breath, "These sly foxes…” picturing Rie and Rudy sharing a sinister laugh.

With another sigh, he poured the prepared potion into his coffee, making sure not to

inhale the potion’s fumes as he did.

As he prepared himself, Kuhn heard snippets of Diark’s conversation,

“…So, with Princess Yuni…”

As Diark’s voice grew louder, Kuhn suddenly darted out from his hiding spot.

Wham!

“Ugh!”

“Tch.”

As Kuhn emerged, Diark couldn’t react in time.

They collided, and Kuhn's coffee, now mixed with the potion, splashed all over Diark.

The coffee stained Diark's uniform a dark hue.

“What the…”

Diark stared at Kuhn, the freshman now part of Rudy Astria's student council.

Recognizing him, anger bubbled within Diark.

"Diark, are you okay?"

People nearby approached Diark with concern.

Diark suppressed a curse and responded,

“Ah, I'm fine. Accidents happen.”

Thump…

Suddenly, Diark felt his heart pounding heavily.

He felt heat rising to his forehead.

‘What’s going on? Why am I…?’

Diark glanced at Kuhn, who had bumped into him and now lay sprawled on the ground.

That commoner who was part of Rudy Astria’s student council.

A mere commoner.

To anyone watching, it simply looked like an ordinary accident.

However, Diark felt an inexplicable surge of anger.

Even though it was a minor incident and there were people around, he was boiling with rage.

Kuhn brushed himself off and stood up, looking at Diark with a smile.

"Are you okay? Sorry about that."

Seeing Kuhn's smile, Diark felt his anger reach its peak.

The innocent smile seemed like a mockery to him, as if Kuhn had deliberately spilled coffee on him.

Diark retorted sharply,

“Watch where you're going, will you?”

“Di… Diark?”

Hearing Diark's response, the surrounding students started murmuring in surprise.

But Diark didn’t care about the situation or their reactions.

"I apologized, didn't I? It wasn't just my mistake. You weren't paying attention either, right?"

“What’s with this guy?”

Diark's face turned red with fury as he glared at Kuhn.

Kuhn narrowed his eyes and muttered quietly,

"This is why I dislike nobles…"

It was a soft comment, but it was audible enough for everyone to hear.

Hearing Kuhn's remark, Diark's eyes widened in disbelief.

“You think you have the right to talk back, a mere commoner?”

Diark approached Kuhn, poking him in the forehead.

“Do you think we’re on the same level just because we’re both in the academy, or because our student councils are competing? Do you see us as equals?”

Poking Kuhn’s forehead, he continued,

“Without Princess Rie or Senior Rudy Astria, what do you even have?”

Kuhn glared back, his voice cold,

“And without your family name, what do you have?”

“What did you just say?”

Diark grabbed Kuhn by the collar, his voice icy.

"You sure have a long tongue for a commoner."

“Enough, Diark!”

Other students rushed forward to intervene.

"Diark, look around you…"

Only then did Diark look around and notice the crowd that had gathered, all of whom had witnessed his public belittling of a commoner.

Recollecting his words, the realization struck him.

He had insulted a commoner in front of many who supported the student council, which was largely backed by commoners.

Diark released Kuhn, his face pale.

Straightening his clothes, Kuhn gave a sly smile.

"You should be careful with your words, my friend."

CHAPTER 107
STUDENT COUNCIL ELECTION2 (5)

In a room filled with silence, Evan heaved a sigh as he sat.

"Why don't you want to climb higher?"

Yuni's words echoed in his mind.

She had sought him out while he was training.

But Evan, uninterested in power, had immediately declined her offer.

At his response, Yuni chuckled.

"Oh, do you think the student council offers just power? How naive,"

She teased.

"From observing you, it seems you crave strength. With the student council, you gain not just power, but also influence and resources."

Evan was skeptical.

What was she up to?

"All I need is your name,"

Yuni admitted.

"To defeat Rudy Astria, I need various tools. I don't need anything else from you."

Hearing this, Evan nodded, but considering the current situation, he began to regret it.

"I'm, I'm sorry,"

Diark apologized, lowering his head, while Yuni sighed deeply beside him.

From the start, Evan had believed that uniting nobles and commoners was a flawed idea.

Neither the emperor, the Astria family, nor even the rebels had managed it.

How could a young princess like Yuni achieve such a feat?

Especially against an opponent like Rudy Astria, who was no pushover.

Perhaps it would have been better to firmly side with either the nobles or the commoners, emphasizing one over the other.

As a princess with two top seats in the student council, they had a lot to show off.

It could only be said that Yuni hadn't thought things through.

Even if they had secured votes through deception or favoritism, maintaining continuous support would have been difficult.

A student council without the students' backing is nothing but a figurehead.

The academy depended heavily on student cooperation.

Most of the student council's tasks were carried out with their help.

And the students did so with a deep-rooted trust in their chosen candidates, believing that supporting them would enhance their academy life.

Once the student council loses that trust, its downfall was only a matter of time.

"It can't be helped now. What's done is done,"

Yuni shrugged, without any visible anger.

"I've got some studying to do. I'll be on my way."

She waved and swiftly left the room, leaving everyone around visibly confused.

Due to Diark's blunder, the academy's opinion was swaying.

Though the final outcome was yet to be determined, their side was clearly on the losing end.

Comparing Rudy's scandal-free council to Yuni's controversy-ridden one, the victor seemed clear.

Yet, Yuni's expression remained unchanged, and she showed no signs of strategizing a countermove.

It was confusing.

Evan rose from his seat, speaking up.

“Let’s disband for today. There's nothing we can do right now.”

The student council members around nodded in agreement.

The next day.

“I'm resigning as student council president.”

Yuni stated this without any noticeable change in her expression.

“What… What are you talking about…?”

Diark was so taken aback he couldn't continue.

“We lost anyway, didn't we? We can't suddenly change our strategy now.”

"Do you really think that makes sense?"

Evan, unable to contain his anger, blurted out,

“Everyone here gathered to make you the student council president.”

“You probably gathered out of desire for the student council's privileges rather than truly wanting me as president.”

Yuni's face contorted in a frown.

“Yes, maybe some were drawn to the privileges. But the main goal was to make you the president, regardless of the reasons,”

Evan’s voice was filled with frustration, but Yuni looked as if she couldn’t understand.

“So, who ruined our plan? Is it my fault?”

Stunned, Diark looked at her, not knowing how to respond.

“I don’t understand why you're all angry with me,”

“Wasn't your goal to become the student council president? Can you give up on that so easily?”

“My goal wasn't to be the student council president.”

“…What?”

The surrounding people started murmuring.

“My goal was to get Rudy Astria on my side. If Rudy had agreed to support me, I was prepared to resign,”

Evan looked at her in disbelief,

“Then you should’ve joined Rudy’s student council. Why did you even attempt to create one?”

Yuni, still frowning, opened her mouth,

“Then I'd have to work under my sister.”

It was truly a childish reason.

“Let's stop…”

Evan gave up trying to reason with her.

Arguing would change nothing.

Motivating someone without the drive was harder than anything else.

“I’m leaving,”

Evan declared, his face red with anger, and stormed out.

Yuni watched Evan’s exit with a puzzled expression, then relaxed and smiled.

“So, I’ll resign. Any objections?”

“…She resigned?”

I looked at Kuhn in disbelief.

“Yes, that's what I heard. Professor Mcguire asked me to relay the message.”

“Well, that sounds like something she’d do.”

Rie commented nonchalantly.

I couldn’t wrap my head around it.

Does all this drama just end like that?

Seeing my confusion, Rie began to explain.

“She told you from the start. She wasn’t after the student council presidency. You were her primary target.”

“To… date me?”

“She probably wanted something out of dating you.”

Rie shrugged.

I doubted she had genuine feelings for me.

But if she didn't like me, then what had she hoped to gain from this?

I was curious.

Turning to Rie, I asked,

“Do you know where Yuni is right now?”

“You want to confront her directly? You might just get even more upset.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Yuni, she’s still a child. She knows nothing of the real world.”

A child…?

“Still, I want to talk. Can you tell me where she is?”

With the information Rie provided, I headed to Yuni’s location.

It turned out to be her room.

Knock, knock.

“Yuni, are you in there?”

A faint sound echoed from within, and soon the door opened, revealing Yuni in her pajamas.

“What a surprise. To what do I owe this visit at such an hour?”

“…Your attire.”

“Oh, it’s fine since it's you. What brings you here?”

What did she mean, 'since it's me'? I was taken aback, but I quickly steered the conversation back on track.

“I wanted to talk about your resignation from the student council presidency.”

“Oh, that?”

She opened the door wider.

“Shall we sit and talk?”

Without hesitation, I stepped inside.

“What would you like to drink? Coffee? Tea?”

“I’m good, thanks.”

I found it weird to see her so cheerful.

She had confidently declared her intentions, and yet she lost to both Rie and me.

Of course, since she willingly resigned, she might not feel too down about it.

But I expected at least a little bit of emotion.

Yet here she was, welcoming me with such brightness.

“In that case, just some coffee.”

Calling over a servant, she ordered,

“Two cups of coffee, please.”

While waiting, my eyes wandered around her room.

A pink-frilled bed, a teddy bear on the side, and books scattered all over her desk which indicated her dedication to her studies.

But something caught my eye.

“Is this a portrait?”

A frame about the size of my arm displayed a picture of the Emperor, Rie, and Yuni, all smiling together.

“Oh, it’s a portrait drawn using magic.”

Yuni, holding two cups of coffee, walked over.

“Weren't you on bad terms with Rie?”

“…Well, somewhat."

Yuni looked uneasy for a moment, but her expression relaxed as she replied,

"You said you had something you wanted to ask?"

“Yes, why did you resign?”

With a playful pout, Yuni teased,

"I thought you came to console me."

When I didn't respond and just looked at her, Yuni sighed,

“It was a battle I couldn't win, wasn’t it?”

"You don't know until you try. There's a difference between losing a battle and running away without trying."

“Well, that's true. But for me, it wasn’t about the battle or its outcome.”

“Did you genuinely think I'd date you?”

“If I was overwhelmingly winning, I thought you might.”

Now I understood what Rie had meant.

Yuni really was just a child.

“What would you have done if we didn't turn the tables, and I hadn't asked for your help?”

“I would have still resigned. Being the student council president is tough. And I hate anything that’s hard.”

It was a battle where she'd win, no matter the outcome.

The effort I made to defeat her felt pointless, and I started to get frustrated.

What about the people who worried and supported me?

What about those who supported her?

Were they fighting a losing battle from the start?

It wasn't even a battle.

Yuni never intended to fight in the first place.

Everyone involved in this election was just toys in Yuni's game.

“You’re insufferable.”

I felt an urge to set her straight.

“Let’s make a bet. If you win, I'll date you.”

CHAPTER 108
STUDENT COUNCIL ELECTION2 (6)

I spread out a mat on the training area.

"Rudy, what are you up to? Why did you suddenly ask me to wear comfy clothes?"

Yuni showed up, grumbling in her casual sportswear.

It was around the time when the sun was beginning to set.

A reddish twilight hue bathed the training area.

Complaining was understandable, given that it was dinner time.

"Nothing special. Just thought we could play a simple game."

"A game?"

I tapped the mat laid out on the ground.

"Feel it. Doesn't it seem soft and safe, even if you fall on it?"

I looked at Yuni with a smile.

She shot me a suspicious look.

"What are you trying to do?"

"Nothing much. So, up for a challenge?"

"Hmm… I'll hear it out first."

It already seemed like she was up for whatever, having come this far.

"The goal is simple: knock your opponent down. The win is confirmed when their

back touches this mat — not just a bit, but the entire back."

"Wait, how… using magic?"

"No, magic would give me an advantage. We'll do it with just our physical abilities."

Yuni stared at me, incredulous.

"Do you really think I have the same strength as you?"

"But."

I held up two fingers.

"You only have to do it one time, while I have to do it two hundred. You only need to knock me down once."

“…Two hundred times?"

Yuni's eyes widened in surprise.

"How about it? Not too hard, right?"

Seeing my smirk, Yuni covered her mouth, pondering.

“…And if I lose?"

"You'll have to do something for me. I can't think of anyone else but you for that particular task."

"For you? Only me?"

Yuni pondered for a moment, then broke into a sly grin.

"Well, if that's the case, I have no choice. It does seem simple and fun, after all. I just have to knock you down, right?"

With that, Yuni stepped onto the mat.

"I'll win in no time."

Diark heaved a sigh.

He made a mistake.

Unable to contain his anger, he blurted out words he shouldn't have.

"That commoner…”

Diark thought of the smirk Kuhn had shown at the end.

An expression so annoying that he couldn't bear it.

He nearly threw a punch upon seeing that smirk but, with immense self-control, he hastily retreated from the scene.

Yet, reflecting on the current situation, he felt he should've just thrown that punch.

He never thought Princess Yuni would relinquish her student council presidency so readily.

No, it was even more shocking to hear she had never desired the position from the start.

There had always been many rumors surrounding Princess Yuni.

From being labeled a talentless princess and the disgrace of the royal lineage, to the clueless princess and others, she had been given numerous peculiar nicknames.

But having spoken to her personally, Diark realized these rumors didn't hold up.

She was knowledgeable in various areas, her grades at the academy were among the top, and she was skilled enough to be in the elite class.

Yet, every time he watched her, something seemed wrong.

Despite her apparent depth, there was an emptiness about her.

And with what happened recently, he pinpointed what it was.

It was ambition.

Most of the discussions between Diark and Yuni centered around the student council presidency.

But from the beginning, Princess Yuni showed no genuine interest, hence the lack of enthusiasm.

That said, it didn't mean she lacked enthusiasm in other areas.

When attending classes, she was always listening with full concentration.

"Ugh…"

Diark sighed again and rose from his seat.

While Yuni might have had thoughts of giving up from the start, had he not made a mistake, she might have changed her mind.

In the end, the reason they lost the election was due to his mistake.

That didn't mean he wasn't irritated with Yuni.

Though he acknowledged his error, he was genuinely angered by her words.

Such thoughts only increased his frustration and concerns.

"Maybe I should train a bit…"

Diark picked up the sword beside him and headed to the training area.

With midterms around the corner, he needed to refocus and get back to studying.

Though Diark enrolled in the magic department, being a magic swordsman, he occasionally trained by himself.

As Diark approached the training area, he began to hear an unsettling noise.

"Kyaaaaa!!!"

A woman's shriek.

But it didn't end there.

"St-stop!!! I admit defeat!!! Keeeek!!!"

Diark, with his sword lowered, cautiously moved towards the training area.

He wasn't sure about the specifics, but it was clear someone was in distress.

To save that person, it was essential to approach cautiously and silently subdue the perpetrator rather than rushing in.

A hasty move might turn the victim into a hostage.

Diark carefully opened the door and peered inside.

Inside, he saw a man and a woman.

“Kiyaaaaaaaa!!!”

Thud!!!

The man forcefully slammed the woman onto the ground.

'Is that… Rudy Astria?'

The woman on the ground was Yuni.

The two had once vied for the position of student council president.

But what were they doing now?

"I admit defeat alreadyyyyyyy!!!"

Thud!!!

Rudy seized Yuni's arm, causing her to trace an arc in the air before crashing back down.

Looking at Yuni on the ground, Rudy remarked,

"That's the 87th time."

While Yuni wore comfortable sportswear, Rudy was dressed in the academy's uniform.

Rudy removed his tie and threw it to the ground.

"Get up. Let's finish this quickly."

"Can we… can we end this now? I've had enough…"

Rudy gently helped Yuni to her feet.

His grip, though firm, didn't seem harmful.

It was as if he was merely assisting a younger sibling to stand.

However, his next move showed no mercy.

"I've had enoughhhhhhhhhhh!!!"

Thud!!!!!!!

"……."

Multiple mats cushioned the floor, reducing the impact.

But being continually thrown into the air like that must have been disorienting.

Still, seeing Yuni repeatedly crash onto the ground evoked an inexplicable satisfaction in him.

For a moment, Diark watched the scene, feeling a rush of joy.

It was as if he was relieving stress without having to undergo any training himself.

After observing for a brief period, a contented smile formed on Diark's face and he returned to his room.

"Rudy… that's too much. Seriously… how could you do this to me!!!!"

"It seems you still have the energy to complain."

The match didn't feel like much of a contest anymore.

Around the time I slammed Yuni to the ground for the tenth time, she had lost her enthusiasm, but I was committed.

200 times.

I had a sense of obligation to keep to the 200 throws I had promised.

Eventually, I achieved it.

Wiping my sweat, I felt a sense of accomplishment.

Around the 100th throw, Yuni had yelled for me to stop.

But by the 150th, she simply got up on her own, signaling for me to continue.

She probably decided it was better to finish quickly than to resist.

"We're finally done."

I picked up my school uniform and tie from the floor.

"So, I won, right?"

"Yes~ Yes~ You won."

Yuni raised her hand in a sign of defeat.

I chuckled at her reaction.

"Rudy!"

Suddenly, the door burst open, and Luna dashed in.

"Rudy! You skipped dinner and didn't study… what have you been doing?"

Entering the training area, Luna's eyes darted between Yuni and me.

Seeing our disheveled state, Luna looked at us with a mix of shock and confusion.

"Huh? Luna?"

Confused by her abrupt reaction, I tilted my head.

Why was she reacting like that?

I glanced over at Yuni and myself.

The floor was wet from our sweat, Yuni's clothes were disheveled, and I had casually unbuttoned my shirt.

Yuni was sitting on the floor, seemingly too drained to stand, gasping for breath.

"Luna… You're not thinking something weird, are you?"

"Ah, ah…"

Luna's eyes widened, and she began to step back.

"Hey, it's not like that."

Though the scene might have looked a bit peculiar, who in their right mind would do anything indecent here in the training area?

Sure, this place was on the outskirts, a place not frequented by many.

Someone might assume something might have happened, but…

Just then, Luna seemed about to scream.

"Ru-Rudy…! Rudy has become…!"

"Shh, quiet!"

From behind, Rie appeared with a smile, covering Luna's mouth.

"There's no problem here, so don't worry."

"Mmm…?"

I awkwardly smiled at Luna, who was looking baffled.

Lately, Luna seemed to find herself silenced quite often.

"Rie…"

Yuni looked intently at Rie.

Rie released Luna and walked over to Yuni, squatting down in front of her.

"You do realize you were in the wrong, right?"

"…Yes."

"Why did you do it? You weren't like this before."

Rie spoke in a soothing tone.

Initially, I had thought they didn't get along well, but seeing them now, they seemed closer than I had assumed.

"……I'm sorry."

"You don't need to apologize to me. You should apologize to those who had faith in you."

Rie extended her hand to Yuni.

I tilted my head, wondering.

So why did she do all this?

I was curious, but it didn't seem like the right time to ask.

“Come on, get up. You haven't eaten, right? Let's go eat."

Yuni, with a gloomy expression, took Rie's hand.

Rie looked at her and smiled gently.

“Oh, by the way, Rudy, what was that thing you bet on?”

As Rie helped Yuni to her feet, she glanced at me.

“Oh, that?”

I chuckled lightly.

Then the next day.

"I'm… I'm to be a teaching assistant?"

I walked with Yuni towards Professor Gracie's laboratory.

"Yes, you'll be a teaching assistant."

"But I'm a… princess, aren't I?"

"It was the result of our bet. You do what I tell you."

"But you never mentioned anything about being a teaching assistant!!! You said it would be something only I could do!!!!!"

I just shrugged in response.

I smiled as I opened the door to Professor Gracie's laboratory.

"Professor, hello."

I stepped inside.

CHAPTER 109
STUDENT COUNCIL ELECTION2 (7)

Professor Gracie looked utterly exhausted.

She had been busy with class preparations, organizing various research materials, and handling academy paperwork.

To top it all off, midterms were approaching.

Her workload seemed endless.

"If it keeps going like this, I might die…!!!"

Her once radiant complexion from her initial days at the academy had faded.

Her skin looked dull, and dark circles had formed under her eyes.

She appeared so drained that if she collapsed, no one would be surprised.

"At least after the midterms are over…”

She tried to find solace in that thought, but even after the midterms, the pile of work seemed endless.

Despair set in.

Gracie's face turned somber.

"Mom… I've been tricked…”

Despite her age, Gracie found herself looking up, as if seeking her mother's guidance.

Knock, knock.

"Professor, may I come in?"

A knock echoed from outside her lab.

"Ah, yes? Sure, come in."

Upon Gracie's response, the door opened, and two figures entered.

Rudy Astria and Yuni Von Ristonia.

A duke's son and a princess.

She was surprised to see them suddenly in her lab.

"Hello, Professor."

Rudy greeted with a gentle smile.

Gracie, puzzled, wondered why these two had come to her lab.

She was sure this was her lab.

There seemed to be no obvious reason for them to be here.

"Um… You do know this is my lab, right?"

Gracie shifted her gaze between Rudy and Yuni.

She wondered if they had mistakenly come to the wrong room.

"Yes, we're here to see Professor Gracie."

Rudy replied with a slight tilt of his head.

Taken aback, Gracie quickly stood up.

"Oh, right! Of course! Please sit down! Would you like some tea or snacks? I can get them right now!"

Gracie swiftly guided them to a table.

These two were significant figures in the academy.

Though she was a professor, this wasn't the time to act distant.

If they were to speak highly of her, perhaps she could get a teaching assistant… or if she was lucky, even two.

She had to make a great impression.

"I'd like black tea, please~ with lots of sugar."

Upon Yuni's request, Gracie nodded enthusiastically.

"Alright! Rudy, would you like something?"

"No, I'm good, thank you."

Gracie hurried to boil some water.

As she was boiling the water, she occasionally glanced at Rudy and Yuni.

Yuni, while calmly observing the room, swiped a finger across the table in front of her.

"Eek."

"Ah."

She realized she hadn't cleaned that table since she started using this lab.

That was a problem.

She couldn't start off on the wrong foot.

"Boil!"

Using her magic, Gracie instantly brought the water to a boil.

She poured the hot water into the teacup and cast a spell inside the room.

"Clean!!!"

As the spell took effect, the surrounding dust and stains began to vanish.

Gracie added a few sugar cubes to the cup filled with black tea, extending her hand toward her desk.

"Reposition."

At her command, the scattered documents lifted into the air and neatly arranged themselves.

In an instant, the room was spotless.

"Now, have you been waiting for a while?"

Gracie smiled warmly, taking a seat across from Yuni and Rudy.

She had tidied up using magic in just an instant, but she phrased her question playfully, as if she'd taken her time.

Observing Gracie, Rudy remarked,

"You're quite skilled with everyday magic."

At Rudy's comment, Gracie chuckled awkwardly.

"Ahaha… It just became a habit after living alone for so long."

Gracie wasn't of noble lineage.

After her graduation from the academy, she joined the ranks of the royal wizards at the lowest tier and became a noble in name only.

Thus, she found it uncomfortable to ask others to clean for her, and usually tidied up on her own.

But, her proficiency in these spells wasn't solely for cleaning.

Being at the lower tier among the royal wizards meant she'd often been tasked with tidying up the labs of her senior colleagues.

Being the kind-hearted Gracie who struggled to say no, she often ended up cleaning up by herself.

That's how she came to master these everyday spells.

These spells were Gracie's unique tools for survival.

"Anyway, why have you come to see me? Preparing for midterms? Having difficulty with some problems?"

Gracie asked in the kindest tone she could muster.

"Professor, do you need a teaching assistant right now?"

Rudy asked, a teasing smile on his lips.

Gracie's eyes widened, and she was suddenly enveloped in anxiety.

She recognized that smile.

It resembled the one people wore when they were about to scam her, especially when they dangled a bait she couldn't resist.

Having been tricked by numerous scams and temptations before, Gracie could sense something suspicious.

"Um… well…”

She hesitated, feeling as if acknowledging his words would lead her right into a trap.

Then Rudy, placing a hand on Yuni's head, spoke.

"Both Yuni and I can serve as your teaching assistants."

“…What?"

The proposal caught Gracie off guard.

But then, she realized it might be a wonderful opportunity.

Having Rudy, the likely future student council president, and Yuni, a royal princess, in her lab was an incredibly enticing prospect.

She could already envision many assistants eager to join just for a chance to connect with them.

In her excitement, Gracie slammed her hand on the desk.

Bang!

"What should I do to make this happen?"

Hearing Gracie's enthusiastic response, Rudy replied with a gentle smile.

"No, you don't have to do anything. Just…"

"Just what?"

"I'm set to become the student council president, right? So, I'll be quite busy."

"Yes, that makes sense."

Gracie began to feel a growing unease.

"And if I'm to be the student council president, it means the academy students and professors recognize my abilities. Additionally, I hold the Second Seat."

Rudy, saying all this, looked her squarely in the eyes.

The more he laid out his credentials, the more her unease turned to certainty.

"So, there should be some extra conditions for me, right?"

"Anything you want! I'll give you everything!"

But Gracie was already reeling.

Indeed, Rudy was a talent anyone would covet.

Not just her or other teaching assistants, but even the nobles of the capital would

lose their minds over someone of his caliber…

The individual who had even swayed Ian Astria, known as the head of the noble faction.

Someone bearing the esteemed Astria name.

This wasn't just any talent.

He was a monumental figure.

And Gracie would be overwhelmed if things stayed the same.

It felt like making a deal with a demon.

But doing nothing might mean death.

She was sure of it!

To survive, she could bear with these demands.

Rudy probably wasn't worse than a real demon.

"For starters, you can pay her salary to me."

Rudy indicated Yuni as he spoke.

“…What?"

Yuni looked at Rudy, clearly taken aback.

"You don't need money, right?"

"Well, that's true."

Taking a colleague's salary.

"And I'd like my salary to be at least five times higher than others. After all, my presence alone will promote the lab and offer various benefits, won't it?"

An outrageous salary proposition.

"Oh, and occasionally, I'd like you to carry out the research I'm interested in. I'll only suggest meaningful research projects, so you don't have to worry."

The audacity.

"And also…"

"Wait a moment…"

Gracie wondered,

'Am I actually dealing with a demon here?'

She couldn't hide her shock.

She had thought his demands might extend to a higher salary or some help with academy assignments.

But as the list grew, it was clear these weren't ordinary demands.

He seemed to be aiming to take control of the very foundation of the lab.

The most heartbreaking part for Gracie was that even knowing this, she couldn't refuse his irresistibly sweet proposal.

"May I continue?"

"There's more?"

"Oh, it's nothing much."

Rudy shrugged it off.

"I just need some materials for my research, so I was thinking of using what's in the lab."

"That… That's fine."

She could accept that.

Many assistants in other labs used the research materials for their work.

Having said that, Rudy took out a sheet of paper.

It listed all the conditions he had just mentioned.

"So, can you accept all of these conditions?"

With a sly smile, Rudy tilted his head slightly.

He seemed devilishly charming.

Rudy swiftly pushed the paper toward Gracie.

After staring intently at the contract, Gracie clenched her eyes shut and picked up a pen.

"Thank you. It's a wise decision."

Extending his hand, Rudy offered a handshake.

After this whirlwind meeting in the research lab,

"Oh… Mom, did I make the right decision…?"

Gracie collapsed onto her desk, letting out a distressed cry.

The day before the student council president elections.

Though I was the only candidate, the students still had a choice.

To abstain.

If a certain percentage abstained, that year would pass without a student council president.

Still, I didn't believe that would happen.

I was confident.

But, confidence aside, there were things that needed to be done.

I walked slowly up to the podium.

Before the student council president elections, a speech.

It was customary before officially taking the position.

“Ah, ah.”

I touched the magic tool placed before me.

After a quick test, I could hear my voice echoing from behind.

I looked outwards.

Countless faces stared back.

Some familiar, others not.

Both professors and students stood in front of me.

This was my first such experience since my entrance ceremony speech.

Though back then, it wasn’t really a proper speech.

“Dear students, hello. I am your student council president candidate, Rudy Astria.”

I greeted them with a smile.

“Winter has passed, and spring has arrived. Flowers have bloomed, and new students have joined us. The friends we saw just yesterday have matured into second-year students, while our seniors are forging their own paths.”

When I first entered the academy, all I wanted was to survive.

I didn't pay much heed to those around me.

“Since entering the academy, I’ve had many experiences. They've led me to form many friendships and experience joyous moments.”

Luna's library incident, Rie's assassination attempt, Harpel's intrusion during Homecoming Day, and the Serina incident.

Life in the academy brought numerous challenges.

But through those events, I made friends.

Real friends, not just characters from a game.

“Though facing these challenges was tough, and at times I wanted to give up, I often thought it might be easier to just let everything go.”

It was risky.

Every rescue attempt carried a risk – that I could lose my life.

There were moments when I wished to abandon these challenges and live a normal life.

Especially since watching my life and those around me constantly at risk was agonizing.

“But I couldn’t give up. I knew a sweet reward awaited. When I look back in the future, I'll be able to say enduring those hardships was worth it.”

Lately, I've been imagining.

Imagining a time post-graduation, surrounded by close friends.

We would share stories.

Discussing the hard times.

Joking about times we narrowly escaped danger.

Sharing laughter over our adventures.

“I wish for all of you to taste such sweet rewards. Even if the journey is a little tough, never give up. Embrace your youth. Embrace the shining present.”

That's why I couldn't give up.

The very reason I stand on this stage today.

I now face the future head-on.

Not just relying on the future I know.

If need be, I'll reshape the future.

Because I can.

“A wonderful academy life awaits all of you.”

I'll embrace the present and challenge the future.

If the future seems bleak, I'll reshape it.

Break it and rebuild it.

And then, I'll confront the consequences of my choices.

“I am Rudy Astria, your candidate for student council president.”

Chatter filled the air.

“Should we treat ourselves to something tasty today?”

Luna mused as she tidied up some books.

“A celebration party sounds perfect.”

Rie replied with a chuckle.

“Can we invite Emily too?”

Kuhn asked as he placed some documents beside me.

“Start organizing these first.”

Locke, who had been absent lately, was present today.

I glanced at the nameplate in front of me.

Student Council President. Astina Persia.

Gently, I wiped off the thin layer of dust from the nameplate using a handkerchief nearby.

“You forgot your nameplate, Astina.”

“Ah, seems so.”

Rie shrugged nonchalantly.

I opened a desk drawer and carefully placed the nameplate inside.

Then, I set my own nameplate where Astina's had been.

Student Council President. Rudy Astria.

A smile crept onto my face as I looked at the nameplate.

Then, addressing everyone, I proposed,

“How about a party today?”

Today, I became the student council president.

CHAPTER 110
NORTHERN INVASION (1)

Up until now, I've been like a blunt sword.

A blade with no edge.

A sword that can't cut its opponent.

But now, things are different.

I've sharpened my blade, and it stands keen and ready.

"The midterm exams are over."

This was my first midterm since becoming the student council president.

To be honest, since I hadn't been in this role for long before these midterms, the responsibilities hadn't really been much of a problem.

I was also serving as an assistant for Professor Gracie, but I was still in the learning phase, so there wasn’t much work to do.

Thus, I had ample time to study.

I felt like I studied harder for this exam than any other before.

Now as a second-year student, the volume of my studies and the complexity of the content had increased.

It was only natural that I worked harder than in my first year.

But the me of now is different.

I was a blade, sharpened to cut Evan.

A sword honed to perfection.

So, there should be nothing I couldn't cut…

No.

There shouldn't have been.

The next day.

[

Evan 2. Luna Railer 3. Rie Von Ristonia 4. Rudy Astria

…]

"Huh?"

I tilted my head.

"What??"

Something was off.

No, this was wrong.

How could this have happened?

I blinked several times in disbelief.

"Rudy… Are you okay?"

Luna, who sat next to me, asked with a concerned look.

"Ah, um… Yeah… I'm… I'm fine."

Surprisingly, I ranked lower than when I had deliberately tried to score below Evan.

It was ironic, I had been closer to Evan when I was a 'blunt sword'.

Of course, I knew Luna and Rie had studied diligently.

But seeing a rank lower than usual after promising myself the top spot was quite a blow.

As I gazed at my score sheet, disheartened, a voice called out.

"Hey! Luna! Professor Mcguire wants to see you!"

It was someone calling out to Luna.

"Oh, um… Rudy! I'll be right back! I promise I'll be quick!"

"It's okay… Take your time…"

"I'll be super quick! Wait for me in the student council room!"

Luna quickly dashed towards Professor Mcguire's office.

I watched Luna's retreating figure and slowly trudged to the student council room.

"Ah, senior."

A voice called out to me.

It was Yuni.

I looked at her with weary eyes.

Yuni's eyes seemed to question, "What's wrong with him?" before she spoke.

"Professor Gracie said she has something later and asked you to come."

"Oh… Is that so?"

I responded weakly.

Yuni tilted her head, puzzled.

"Why do you look so down?"

"It's just something that happened…"

"What is it?"

"It's just… something."

"What is it? Tell me!"

Yuni shook me lightly, trying to get an answer.

I sighed and shared my concerns about the exam results.

"Pffft! You're sulking over a low score? The mighty Rudy is upset about that?"

Yuni held her stomach and laughed as if she found the situation hilariously absurd.

On any other day, I would've snapped at such a petty taunt, but today, I just wasn't in the mood.

"So, what rank did you get? You're laughing, but where did you place?"

The Yuni I knew wasn't particularly sharp.

She often came across as naïve.

To put it nicely, she was straightforward, but sometimes seemed a tad clueless.

Also a little unpredictable.

That's the kind of person she was.

"I ranked second."

"…What?"

I stared at Yuni in disbelief.

"Second place."

“…”

She claims to be 2nd.

The second seat of the first year.

This very girl.

I wanted to slam my fist on the ground and ask how that was even possible.

“Heh… And you, senior? What's your rank?"

With a mischievous grin, Yuni looked up at me, waiting for an answer.

“Ugh…”

Her question was like a dagger to the heart.

Though we're from different grades, I had nothing to say in return.

I was consistently the second seat during my first year as well.

In that aspect, I wasn't any better than her.

I sighed.

“Fine… Just go and tell Professor Gracie I'll be a bit late due to student council stuff.”

“Okay~!”

With a bright smile, Yuni walked off.

I then entered the student council room.

No one else was there.

It seemed I was the first to arrive.

"Ah…”

I slouched into a chair.

'I can't give up just because of this.'

The first midterm of the second year just ended.

But there were still many exams ahead.

The first semester of the second year wasn't over.

There were also the final exams, so there was still a chance to top the class.

However…

“The problem is, it’s almost impossible…”

Evan had nearly scored perfect marks.

But this time, I ranked fourth.

To surpass him, not only would I need to be perfect, but Evan would also need to slip.

Reaching the top in the usual way seemed almost out of reach.

I ran my fingers through my hair, then lifted my head.

"Guess I should process these documents…”

There was no point in pondering now.

I had to do what needed to be done.

I started sorting through the pile of papers on the desk.

While skimming through them, a particular document caught my eye.

"Northern… support…”

I recalled a lecture from Magical Beast Studies.

The monster attacks that happen every four years.

Reading the document, one detail stood out:

Students who volunteer for the Northern support will receive bonus points added to their academy grade.

My eyes widened.

A way to boost my grades.

There's always a way out, even in the direst situations.

And it seemed I had just found mine.

McDowell found himself in a damp, uncomfortably sticky, confined space.

It felt rather ironic that the Academy's renowned principal would be in such a place.

Nevertheless, he maneuvered with an air of familiarity.

From his vantage point, McDowell looked down.

Below him was a man with black hair — a man known as the leader of the Rebels.

In front of this leader lay a woman, covered in wounds, blood spilling from her mouth, suggesting she had been tortured.

She was still conscious.

"Hmm… She’s quite resilient,"

The leader of the Rebels mused, seated comfortably as he stroked his chin, observing the woman.

The bloodied woman was none other than Yeniel.

With a subtle nod from the leader, a burly man beside him fetched a red-hot iron.

"To think you've become a pawn of the nobility… How pitiful."

As the leader spoke, another man pressed the heated iron against Yeniel's back.

"AAARGHHH!!"

Yeniel let out a heart-wrenching scream.

Regret surged within McDowell, wishing he hadn't sent Yeniel back to The Rebels.

Concerned over her prolonged absence, McDowell had briefly visited the Rebel's hideout.

Yet, as soon as McDowell arrived, the Rebel leader, seemingly anticipating him, summoned Yeniel to his side.

And the torture began.

It was a trap.

Anyone could see that.

But why had this trap been set?

McDowell couldn't understand.

'Did he know I was coming?'

How did they find out that Yeniel was acting as a double agent?

There were many aspects that didn't add up.

Once the iron was removed from Yeniel's body, she gasped for air. The leader, with an impassive gaze, pulled out a pocket watch from within his robes.

He sighed after glancing at it briefly.

"Perhaps slitting her throat will do…"

The leader mumbled as he stood up and drew his blade, slowly advancing towards Yeniel.

Letting out a sigh, McDowell extended his hand.

From his bracelet, a radiant light emerged, forming a golden staff in his hand.

The staff.

An instrument that enhanced a wizard's mana several folds.

If a swordsman's weapon was the sword, for a wizard, it was the staff.

Raising the staff above his head, McDowell intoned,

"Radiance."

Bright light shot from the staff's tip, striking the ground.

Kwaang!

The emitted light burst outwards in a blinding explosion.

Flash magic.

McDowell's signature spell.

A unique magic possessed almost exclusively by McDowell.

This magic was challenging to control, and each casting was massive in scale.

Hence, the mana consumed was significant, making it a spell not just anyone could wield.

The moment the light touched the ground, McDowell burst out from his concealed spot.

He quickly moved forward.

"Body Enhancement."

McDowell chanted.

A strong gust of dust rose from the light's explosion, and he dashed through it, heading straight for Yeniel.

The light began to consume everything, and McDowell tried to save Yeniel before it could reach her.

However, she was gone.

Yeniel, who had been lying on the ground, had disappeared.

"You finally show yourself."

To his side, a black-haired man holding a sword appeared – the Leader of the Rebels.

McDowell's expression hardened upon seeing him.

As the Leader prepared to swing his sword, McDowell quickly extended his staff.

"Lightning Shock."

ZZZZAP!

Lightning Shock was a basic spell of lightning magic.

However, McDowell's casting was far more powerful than most spells of its kind.

As the lightning was about to strike the Leader, an unexpected word escaped his lips.

"Barrier."

Zing!

The lightning was effortlessly deflected by the barrier that formed in front of the Leader.

With a swing of his sword, the leader dispelled the surrounding dust clouds, allowing McDowell to get a clear look at him.

A young man with jet-black hair.

In one hand, he wielded his sword, and in the other, he clutched a pocket watch.

"Tch…"

McDowell clicked his tongue.

He had assumed the man was a swordsman because of the sword, but he was a wizard.

And a highly skilled one at that…

McDowell glanced at the Leader's feet.

Yeniel lay there, pinned under the Leader's boot.

"Did the esteemed academy principal really think he could hide like a rat?"

He taunted with a smirk.

"I apologize for that. But could you lift your filthy foot? My daughter might find it uncomfortable."

The Leader, with a look of confusion, responded,

"…Daughter? Since when did Yeniel become your daughter?"

"Once they enter the academy, all students become like sons and daughters to me."

McDowell declared.

The Leader paused, seemingly taken aback by McDowell's statement, then burst into laughter.

McDowell, staring intently at the laughing Leader, spoke again.

"I asked you to move your foot. Should I cut off that leg?"

With a hint of amusement in his eyes, the Leader replied,

"Then, I suppose I'll have to cut off your arm in return."

McDowell pointed his staff forward.

In anticipation, the Leader pressed a button on the pocket watch he held and raised his sword.

"Let's see what you can do."

CHAPTER 111
NORTHERN INVASION (2)

The North.

In a barren environment lies a territory on the frontier of the empire.

Due to its northern location, it has a dry and cold climate.

Yet, a notable characteristic of this territory is the prominent presence of beasts near its borders.

The lord of the northern territory, Lucarion, hunts these beasts every year.

If the northern territory were breached, the surrounding areas would descend into chaos, so preventative measures are taken.

To aid in these situations, central territories and others regularly send reinforcements.

While they deal with the beasts annually, every four years there's a significant attack.

This attack is, in reality, the beasts' final act of desperation.

As humans hunt them, their population diminishes, and with a scarcity of food, they lash out in one last desperate attempt.

Staving off this onslaught ensures a period of peace.

"Hmm…”

I was slowly going through documents regarding the beast attacks in the North.

These beasts typically attack just before summer, after enduring hunger and near madness during the winter.

The exact day of their attack was never certain, only a general timeframe was known.

"The support from other territories isn't specified yet…"

There were no concrete plans for this upcoming attack.

Given that this event has been experienced several times before, there seemed to be a laid-back approach to preparations.

Reading through the manual, I noticed systematic documentation related to student involvement and reinforcements.

The meticulously crafted manual made me think,

"There's no reason not to…"

The safety of the students was guaranteed, and there were plenty of experienced veterans.

If I were to join the reinforcements, my role would be to ensure the safety of the citizens from within the fortress, providing rear support.

It was a sweet deal.

Of course, even providing rear support had its risks.

But considering all I'd been through, this hardly ranked as dangerous.

I've faced life-threatening situations more than once, so this was manageable.

"This is definitely…"

Bang!

"Rudy! I'm here!"

Luna burst in, panting heavily.

"Shall we go for a walk outside? Or maybe visit a bakery to unwind?"

Her words trailed off as she noticed the North-related book I was reading.

I awkwardly smiled and tucked the book into a drawer.

"Oh, it's alright. Professor Gracie summoned me earlier. I'll pay her a brief visit."

There were things to consider if I was going North.

The responsibilities of a student council president and those of a teaching assistant.

In my absence, someone would need to handle these roles.

As for the teaching assistant role, I had a plan in mind.

"I'll be back in a bit."

"Mm, okay."

Luna responded with an awkward smile.

I then headed towards Professor Gracie's office.

Gracie's research lab.

“…What?"

Gracie widened her eyes in surprise.

"It seems like it could be fun~."

Yuni, standing beside me, smiled mischievously.

"No way! I absolutely refuse! Why would I go there and put myself through that?!"

Gracie vigorously shook her head, expressing her disapproval.

I had made a proposal to Professor Gracie.

The proposal? To head to the northern region together.

Thinking of the lab work and how to manage it, an idea struck me.

If the tasks in the lab simply disappeared, that would solve the problem.

If Professor Gracie went to the North as the supervising professor, the lab work would naturally vanish.

Professor Gracie's lab consisted of just three of us: Yuni, Professor Gracie, and myself.

Two of us were students.

Without Professor Gracie, there'd be no one to delegate the work to.

The lab would essentially go on hiatus.

“You… You're trying to kill me, aren't you? Moreover, what did you do with the Remblin flowers? They were just brought in recently!”

“Oh, I used them well. They were quality herbs.”

“You used… all of them?”

Despair flooded Professor Gracie for another reason.

"How could you use them all?!"

Gracie lamented, her face contorted in distress.

I feigned ignorance at her outcry.

"Setting that aside, let's head to the North together. Imagine the praise from the other professors if their junior took the initiative.”

"I don't need their praise… There'll be so many nobles there. If I go as the representative, they'll make sure I suffer the most."

"Hmm… I have a feeling you're going regardless…”

Yuni said with a smirk, tapping her cheek playfully.

“What are you talking about? Hahaha… just a joke, right?”

Both Gracie and I, even Yuni, knew a certain fact.

Whenever there was tough work, the professors always dumped it on Gracie.

Even we, who recently joined the lab, were aware of this.

Initially, I had planned to accompany Professor Gracie without even telling her.

However, respecting the lab's traditions, I felt she should be the one to formally apply first.

With an awkward smile, Professor Gracie's expression turned solemn as she lowered her head.

“Of course… I'll have to go, won't I?”

“That seems likely.”

Yuni grinned, her smile devilish.

“Why did I even join this place… Perhaps I should've stayed as a Royal Wizard. But then again, that place is hell… But is this place any different? Am I cursed?”

Realizing the truth, Professor Gracie seemed to break down, muttering to herself in a daze.

Seeing Gracie in that state tugged at my heartstrings.

Sighing, I picked up a stack of documents.

“So, I'll take it you're going then?”

“Ah, you're leaving?”

"I've got student council paperwork to deal with, so I'll handle it in the council room."

“Alright then, take care.”

I opened the lab door, taking in Yuni's words as I left.

While Rudy was in his lab,

"Ugh…”

Luna intently examined the documents Rudy had been looking at.

"The North…”

To Luna, the North was synonymous with danger.

Her father's fairy tales from her childhood often spoke of the North as a place laid to ruin by beast attacks.

Beneath the main text of the document, the words 'extra credit' caught her attention.

Rudy, who had underperformed in the recent exam, seemed deeply distressed.

Although Luna had come in second place, her joy was overshadowed by concern.

She had never seen Rudy so despondent, his complexion a shade paler than usual.

She even wished she could give him her own scores.

"So Rudy plans to go there…”

Luna found herself deep in thought.

She wanted to help Rudy.

But if she decided to go to that place herself, her grades would benefit as well.

So, what about Rudy…

"No, no."

Luna momentarily entertained the thought of consistently outperforming Rudy.

But she immediately dismissed it.

Such arrogance, to believe that just because she surpassed Rudy once, she could always do so.

That's why she shook the thought away.

"First, let's consider what I can do for Rudy!"

Seeing Rudy so heartbroken made Luna's heart ache.

It felt as if needles were pricking her.

The worry that the ever-confident and selfless Rudy might crumble weighed heavily on her.

She cherished that bright, self-sacrificing side of Rudy.

Luna made a decision: she would ensure Rudy had the right conditions to travel to the North.

Regarding the student council responsibilities,

Surely, during his time in the North, someone else would temporarily handle the duties of the student council president.

But if she could sort out everything beforehand, it would make Rudy's journey smoother.

With this in mind, she decided to settle all pending tasks.

And also her own responsibilities.

She readied herself to manage all the assignments of Professor Mcguire's lab.

Considering the North's perilous reputation, Rudy would undoubtedly need assistance.

While students typically operated in safe zones, the inherent danger of the North was undeniable.

Luna took off the ribbon around her neck, settled at a desk in the student council room, and spread out the research papers and other documents before her.

"Well, let's begin,"

She whispered.

Determined and focused, Luna, the paperwork powerhouse, set into motion.

Cromwell walked purposefully down the corridor, holding an assortment of documents in one hand.

“Hmm…”

His steps led him toward the principal's office, intent on processing the paperwork and securing the final approval.

However, McDowell had been conspicuously absent lately, a fact that had escaped most of the staff.

McDowell had a habit of disappearing without a trace or word to anyone.

Although Cromwell wasn't entirely sure why, he hadn't probed into it, trusting that if it were essential, McDowell would certainly inform him.

The pressing issue at hand was the pending final approval for these documents due to McDowell's absence.

Despite constantly leaving them in the principal's office, the paperwork remained unattended for quite some time.

Typically, if McDowell planned to be away for an extended period, he would inform the Vice Principal to act on his behalf.

But this time, there had been no such communication.

As he approached, Cromwell caught sight of the principal's office.

"I wonder if he's returned."

Just as this thought crossed his mind, a powerful wave of mana surged from the principal's office.

Thud!

A sound, as if something had fallen, echoed.

“Principal?”

Reacting immediately, Cromwell dashed into the office.

Inside, he found two figures.

One was Yeniel, blood-soaked and disheveled.

The other was Principal McDowell, cradling the injured Yeniel in one arm.

However…

"Ah… Is that you, Cromwell?"

McDowell's right arm was missing, cut off at the forearm, blood still pouring out.

"Principal McDowell!!!"

In alarm, Cromwell rushed to McDowell's aid.

CHAPTER 112
NORTHERN INVASION (3)

"How did this happen…?"

McDowell lay on the bed, his expression heavy.

Standing before him was Cromwell, gazing intently at McDowell's arm.

Specifically, where McDowell's forearm should have been, but wasn't.

The elbow was cut clean off, and a bandage was wrapped around the stump.

"Haah…"

For a wizard, hands were of utmost importance.

Of course, they were essential for swordsmen and ordinary folks as well, but to a wizard, they had a unique significance.

A wizard's hand was a conduit, a focal point for spells.

Most spells required the caster to gesture with their hand in the direction they intended the magic to take effect.

Although there were a few exceptions, the majority of spells relied on this directional cue.

Therefore, losing a hand meant more than just physical loss.

It symbolized the inability to wield magic as they once did.

Yes, McDowell still had his left hand intact, but it wasn't as simple as just switching hands.

People have habits, and switching dominant hands for casting was not easily done.

"Heh, at least I managed to save the child."

He referred to Yeniel.

Yeniel's condition had been dire, but thanks to Cromwell's quick application of healing spells and first aid, her life was no longer in immediate danger.

The real concern now was McDowell, with his severed arm.

"Principal…"

"I wasn't the only one who got hurt. Don't worry about me."

Cromwell exhaled deeply.

Then, with a grave expression, he asked,

"Was it The Rebels?"

"Yes. I faced off against their leader. He wields time magic."

"…Time magic?"

McDowell gave a nod, then continued,

"Let's first go over the situation. Given my current state, can you draft a report and send it to the palace for me?"

He gestured with his severed arm, hinting at his inability to write.

"…Understood."

And so, McDowell began recounting his confrontation with the leader of The Rebels.

After deciding to head to the North, I immersed myself in paperwork.

I spent most of my time in the student council room, diligently working through the piles of documents.

Surprisingly, the pace of processing was faster than I anticipated.

This was thanks to Luna.

"Rudy, I've finished all of it!"

"Already?"

Next to Luna was a towering stack of paperwork.

The volume of which would have taken me two to three days.

Yet, Luna managed to finish it all in just one day.

And she did this while also serving as an assistant in Professor Mcguire's research lab.

I knew Luna was quick with paperwork, but witnessing her efficiency firsthand was something else.

It wasn't as if she was being careless either.

Whenever I checked the papers Luna processed, everything was perfectly organized.

And so, a week went by with us immersed in paperwork.

"What's all this…?"

Rie looked at the mountain of papers stacked in the student council room.

That wasn't a pile of pending tasks.

Those were all the documents we had processed.

Various reports and forms were piled up, occupying a corner of the room.

"Ah, Rie's here?"

I looked at Rie with tired eyes.

Rie sighed after seeing my worn-out state.

I had been so focused in the paperwork for a while now that I looked utterly drained.

While I knew heading North would also be challenging, my current workload made me long for the open expanses of the North.

But I wasn't the only one feeling this exhaustion.

"Ru… Rudy, this is the last document…"

Luna was also hard at work in the student council room.

Even when I told her she didn't have to, Luna stayed, tirelessly sorting out the papers.

I wasn't sure what she meant by that, but seeing Luna gradually wear down was heartbreaking.

For a week, from the end of our classes until nighttime, we processed documents together.

But having Luna by my side made it more bearable.

"So, are we almost done with the paperwork?"

I mumbled to myself as I looked around.

"Heh… Finally, it's over."

Luna seemed relieved, practically melting in her chair, her energy completely drained.

Rie sighed as she observed both Luna and me.

"So, are you finally going to tell me? Why all this paperwork?"

"The North."

I replied with a faint smile.

"I'm going to apply to go to the North."

"And what about you, Luna?"

“…I'll be heading to the North too."

I stared at Luna in surprise.

Avoiding my gaze, Luna cleared her throat awkwardly.

"From the looks of it, it doesn't seem like you two plotted this together."

Rie crossed her arms and looked at us.

"So, you're planning to dump everything on me and disappear? All three of you going off to have fun?"

“…Three?"

I looked at Rie with a confused expression.

"Locke is there, too."

“…Oh?"

I then remembered, Locke was indeed with us.

Locke was the son of Count Lucarion.

In retrospect, Locke's participation was pretty much a given.

I hadn't taken that into account.

So, I was essentially leaving everything to Rie.

"Um… I'm sorry…”

"You just realized?"

Rie squinted at me.

Luna and I guiltily bowed our heads, sneaking glances to gauge Rie's reaction.

For a while, Rie silently stared at the two of us before finally speaking.

"Alright, go on then. You're going because of the grades, right?"

I blinked in surprise at Rie's unexpected approval.

“…We can go?"

"You were already planning on it anyway, weren't you? And all the paperwork is done."

Rie sighed and sat down on a chair.

"I figured you might do this, so I've already found a few people to take over."

"You knew we'd be heading north?"

"At this time of year, and seeing how hard you two have been working, it was obvious."

I was genuinely impressed with Rie's foresight.

Indeed, while we had most of the paperwork ready, there were other responsibilities.

The mid-term camp for first-year students.

An event we'd attended ourselves.

We needed people to handle that in our absence.

I'd been scouting potential candidates, but hearing she'd already done so impressed me even more.

"Rie…!"

I was deeply moved by Rie's words.

Luna seemed equally touched, mirroring my expression.

"You're incredible, Rie! Always thinking a step ahead!"

As I praised Rie, Luna gathered her hands, chimed in,

"You truly are the best, Rie! So smart and beautiful!"

"Hmm…"

Rie, trying to hide her slight blush, turned away.

Clearly, our flattery wasn't entirely unwelcome.

"The prettiest Rie in the world!"

"The wisest Rie in the entire empire!"

Luna and I continued showering Rie with compliments.

"Okay, okay, enough!"

Blushing, Rie backed away, waving her hands dismissively.

As our praises continued, the door to the student council room opened.

"Ah."

Luna and I froze, spotting the newcomers.

They probably heard our enthusiastic compliments.

"Um, hello?"

"…What are you doing?"

Emily and Kuhn entered the student council room. Emily gave an awkward, flustered smile while Kuhn looked at us with disdain.

"Ah…"

After an awkward silence and a series of explanations, we finally cleared up the misunderstanding - which wasn't really a misunderstanding at all.

Persia Territory.

In the main office of the estate, Astina was processing some documents.

Her father, the current head of the family, stood before her.

"Heh, at this rate, I might as well hand over the family affairs to you."

It had been quite some time since Astina began handling the responsibilities of the family head.

For the first month, she simply observed her father's work, but after that, she took over, managing the family affairs on her own.

Even without guidance, she was capable of handling everything.

Her inherent charisma made her popular among neighboring families, and she consistently represented the family at central* meetings, displaying all the qualities of a proper heir.

Because of her impeccable work, other nobles had begun to see her as the rightful successor of the Persia family.

The fact that her older brother Harpel was no longer around also solidified her position.

Astina smiled gracefully.

"It's all thanks to the guidance you've provided, Father."

The head of the Persia family looked at her with pride, a warm smile on his face.

He chuckled as he walked out of the room,

"Alright then, I'm off to rest. Take care of those documents."

"Yes, Father. Rest well."

Once her father left, Astina continued her work, processing the documents one by one.

As she did, she found herself gazing absentmindedly out of the window.

"I wonder how everyone is doing at the academy."

Not long ago, she heard that Rudy had become the student council president.

Rie was elected as the vice president, and Luna had also joined the council.

Hearing that news made her long to see Rudy's face.

It had been months since their last meeting.

She had been too busy before to miss him, but now, with things a bit more relaxed, she found herself wanting to revisit the academy, curious to see Rudy in his new role.

Just then, her secretary entered the office.

"Miss Astina, a letter has arrived."

"Oh? Let's see."

Astina took the letter from her secretary.

Upon seeing the royal seal stamped on it, her eyebrows furrowed.

Though termed a 'letter', it resembled more of an official document.

Typically, letters with such a prominent royal seal were for official matters, not personal correspondence.

Drawing a letter opener from her desk, Astina carefully opened the envelope.

The contents related to the northern region, specifically about an impending beast invasion there, with a request for support.

"The northern region…”

Upon hearing 'northern region', she immediately thought of Locke.

Though they hadn't spoken much, he had been a part of the student council during her tenure as president.

He was a diligent worker, dedicated to his duties.

While they weren't too friendly initially, by the end of her term, she had grown quite fond of him.

"It's his territory. I must provide proper support."

Astina pondered deeply, contemplating the best way to assist.

She finally made a decision.

“Riche.”

“Yes?”

Astina called her secretary and flashed a sly smile.

“Could you ask my father something for me?”

“What would you like to ask…?”

Astina lightly tapped the letter she was holding.

“Ask him if it’s alright for me to personally go there.”

Astina was becoming quite impatient.

She had been enduring the same daily tasks and putting on insincere smiles for months now.

She longed for a break to relieve her stress.

The letter mentioned that students from the academy were helping, so perhaps

Locke might also return to his territory.

If that was the case, she could ask how Rudy has been doing lately.

She chuckled, all while being completely unaware that Rudy was headed to the North.

CHAPTER 113
NORTHERN INVASION (4)

The weather was clear.

People could be seen walking around the territory.

It was a lively atmosphere with an abundance of both sellers and buyers.

The territory wasn’t particularly large, but with the number of people present, you'd think there wasn't an impending magical beast invasion.

"Rudy! Let's go over there!"

I'm currently in the North.

The Northern region, Lucarion territory.

Luna and I were able to come to the north through proper procedures.

Our supervising professor is Professor Gracie.

Most 3rd-year students were on their internships, so none of them were present.

The first-year students were also absent due to midterm camp.

At first, Yuni tried to skip the midterm camp to join us here.

-Wait, wasn’t I supposed to come too?

-Why would you go? You should be at the midterm camp. It affects your grades, after all.

-But we're lab comrades! Are you leaving me out?

Yuni vehemently argued her case.

She truly wanted to ditch the midterm camp and come here.

-Do you think this is some kind of field trip?

-Isn't it?

While Yuni and I were having this back-and-forth,

Rie came into the lab.

-Don't worry about the midterm camp.

-… What?

Rie said she had already excluded Yuni from the midterm camp attendees.

In exchange for a perfect score, Yuni would assist with student council duties.

Such an arrangement would usually be impossible, but when I expressed my wish to visit the North, they made it work.

The reason for the extra credits for the Northern visit?

Simply because few students apply.

The academy's assurance of safety to students visiting the North is due to the same reason.

However, when the student council president, which is me, wanted to go, the academy seemed to bend over backward to make it happen.

Yuni looked baffled, wondering how it went through without asking her first.

But Rie just shrugged and smiled, saying it was done.

Yuni simply nodded back.

It was curious how Yuni just accepted it obediently, but the matter was resolved for the time being.

"Luna, that looks fun too!"

"Oh, really? Let's check it out!"

And so, we arrived in the North.

The students treated us with honored guests, making sure we were comfortable.

After that, they let us do as we pleased.

Technically, it was Professor Gracie who decided to give us free rein.

On our arrival, Professor Gracie announced she would rest, leaving the students to explore on their own.

Her behavior wasn't surprising.

Before arriving here, Professor Gracie, like Luna and me, had been swamped with work.

Although most tasks were handed over to other labs, there were still some that Professor Gracie had to complete.

She had completed all of them before coming here.

She probably worked without getting any sleep.

We left a worn-out Professor Gracie at the lodgings and stepped outside.

Outside, there was plenty of food and attractions.

I had initially planned to just tour the territory, but I couldn’t resist this.

"Could I get one of those skewers, please?"

"Of course! Thank you!"

Luna handed over some money and bought a skewer, taking an eager bite.

"Rudy, this tastes amazing."

She spoke, savoring every bite of her skewer.

Seeing her like that naturally brought a smile to my face.

Lately, we haven't had much of a chance to unwind and enjoy ourselves.

This felt like a refreshing change.

"But, why are there so many people here?"

After finishing her bite, Luna looked around curiously.

"They're probably here because of the magical beasts."

Upon hearing my explanation, Luna tilted her head in confusion.

"But everyone looks rather cheerful, don't they?"

She's right.

I thought the locals would be trembling in fear, knowing that numerous magical beasts could attack the fortress at any moment.

Yet, despite that, the people in the territory were spirited.

"Ah, it's because they all trust the Lord of the territory."

The skewer vendor in front of us chimed in.

"The beasts have never made it inside the fortress. Our Lord has always guarded it well."

"They trust the Lord, you say?"

That made sense.

From the perspective of the ordinary residents, if the magical beasts couldn't penetrate the fortress, it would make them think everything was safe.

The massive influx of people into the territory every four years was good for

business, and considering the valuable materials obtained from slain beasts, the entire event felt more like a festival for the locals.

However…

My gaze turned to the Lord's mansion.

"The Lord needs to come up with a solution!"

"Think of your people, Lord!"

In front of the mansion, a surprisingly large group of people was protesting.

“There’s a reason for that…”

“What reason?”

“There was a food shortage last winter.”

I had heard stories about it.

In the harsh North, winter always brought with it food shortages.

Even with money, the main issue was transportation.

When heavy snowfalls occurred, it was impossible to transport food to the North using carriages.

Especially in the North where it snowed heavier than the other regions.

Storing large quantities of food in advance also wasn't feasible.

While magic could extend the food's shelf life, the cost of using wizards or magical tools often exceeded the food's value.

So, the North always had food-related issues.

"Ugh, it's those rebels. Only our kind Lord suffers."

I didn't respond to that remark, merely watching the crowd in front of the mansion.

A typical Lord wouldn't have tolerated such a gathering outside their mansion.

The Lord was surely working on solutions for the food crisis, and yet, the citizens were protesting.

Any other Lord would have surely acted out of injustice, but the head of the Lucarion family, the Lord of this place, merely observed in silence.

It was as if he considered their complaints as just another opinion.

"More importantly… the rebels…"

I still haven't received any news about Yeniel.

I once headed to the principal's office out of curiosity, but only found Cromwell there.

I heard that Principal McDowell is currently away on a business trip, making it difficult to meet him.

"Rudy, is something bothering you?"

"No, it's nothing."

"Shall we head that way then?"

"Yes."

I smiled gently, following behind Luna, and momentarily turned to gaze at the Lord's mansion.

"Hmm…"

"Ugh… I just want to rest…"

Dragging her weary body, Gracie made her way to the Lord's mansion.

She was heading for a dinner with the nobles who came from the central region, the

head of the Lucarion family, and herself, representing the academy.

Even though Gracie would have preferred to skip dinner and just sleep in her room, she couldn't miss such an important gathering.

It wasn't in Gracie's nature to make such excuses.

"Heh…"

As Gracie sighed and was about to enter the mansion,

“Hello?”

Someone called out to her.

“Hmm?”

Gracie turned to see who it was.

A woman with fiery red hair.

She radiated an aura of grace and her poised demeanor was truly remarkable.

“Oh, you are?”

Not many in the empire had such red hair.

Especially not as vivid and blood-red as this.

A dignified woman with such hair could only be…

“Could you be… from the Persia family?”

“Yes, I am Astina Persia.”

Gracie blinked in surprise.

“I've heard a lot about you. You're Professor Gracie, aren't you?”

“Yes, that's… correct.”

Gracie hesitated, searching for the right words.

She was a professor, and Astina, a student.

But Astina had served as the student council president even before Gracie's tenure began, and this was their first face-to-face meeting.

Gracie's thoughts raced.

Should she address Astina as a student or as a noble from the central region?

Astina was the heir to the Persia Viscount family, holding a status higher than the local Lord, Lucarion.

Though she hadn't officially inherited the family name yet, it was widely believed it was only a matter of time.

So, should Gracie treat her like a Viscount?

However, as Gracie wondered this, Astina smiled faintly.

"How is Professor Cromwell?"

"Pr, Professor Cromwell?"

That's when it hit Gracie.

She remembered the person who had told her about Astina.

It was Cromwell.

The connection between Gracie and Astina:

Both were disciples of Cromwell, having learned telekinetic magic from him, sharing a deep bond of master and disciple.

"I've heard much about you, senior."

Astina's respectful address warmed Gracie's heart.

Senior…

Such a title brought back fond memories, erasing the sorrows of her days as a royal wizard and a professor.

How wonderful were her student days?

She was the top of her class, constantly praised by the faculty, and everyone looked up to her with respect.

It was a memory as radiant as a jewel.

"Yes! Astina, I've heard so much about you too!"

With Gracie's cheerful words, Astina's mood visibly brightened.

Being too stiff with each other would only make things uncomfortable.

"What are the other students up to right now?"

"Oh, they're probably wandering around. They were told they could explore the area."

"Did Locke go as well?"

"Locke? Ah, I believe he might be at the castle."

Upon hearing this, Astina nodded.

She had initially wanted to inquire about Rudy, but hesitated, thinking it might be rude to abruptly bring him up.

However, as if Gracie sensed Astina's thoughts, she spoke up.

"Rudy and Luna said they'd be outside, so excluding them and Locke, the others should be at their accommodations."

Gracie said this offhandedly.

Astina's eyes widened in response.

"Rudy… you mean?"

"Yes, Rudy Astria."

"Right…"

A look of surprise spread across Astina's face.

Seeing her reaction, Gracie tilted her head in confusion.

Astina seemed like the type who wouldn't easily show their emotions.

But seeing her shocked expression, Gracie couldn't help but wonder the reason for it.

Gracie cautiously tried to gauge Astina's thoughts.

"Did something happen between the two of you?"

"No, not at all. Absolutely not."

Astina quickly waved her hands in dismissal and then swallowed.

"After the meeting, could we possibly go together?"

"Together? Where to?"

"To where the students are staying."

Astina said, her voice a mixture of excitement, surprise, and anticipation.

CHAPTER 114
NORTHERN INVASION (5)

Luna and I explored the territory, taking in the surroundings.

Initially, we were enjoying the local delicacies and shops.

Now, we were inspecting the surrounding walls.

“Wow…”

I gazed at the walls, awestruck.

It felt as if I was looking at the Great Wall of China, standing as an unyielding fortress.

Soldiers patrolled the walls, standing guard. Nearby, we could spot military equipment, likely prepared in anticipation of beast attacks.

Luna and I continued our leisurely stroll along the wall.

The place was barren, devoid of anyone but soldiers.

However, the guards seemed more focused on the area outside the walls and paid little attention to us.

This was a restricted area, only accessible to authorized personnel.

We, visiting students, were granted access. But it wasn't open to the general public.

With only authorized individuals around, the soldiers primarily kept their eyes fixed beyond the walls.

“Hey, Rudy?”

While I was lost in the view of the wall, Luna gently tugged on my sleeve.

“Yeah?”

“That person… Don't they seem out of place?”

I followed Luna's gaze.

An individual wandering around, looking out of place.

The attire wasn't typical of the soldiers guarding the wall.

And their cautious, sneaky movements were unmistakable.

Their demeanor practically shouted, ‘I'm up to no good!’

“What's going on?”

“Who knows? What could they be up to?”

Luna and I exchanged glances after observing the individual for a moment.

“Should we keep an eye on them?”

Someone wandering so aimlessly in such a desolate area surely had a reason.

More puzzling was how they managed to get in here.

It was rare for non-soldiers to gain entry.

A thought crossed my mind.

The story we had heard.

The Rebels.

Could they be related?

Of course, there was a chance they weren’t.

But instead of ignoring a suspicious person, we decided it was best to observe them a bit longer.

We discreetly trailed them.

They headed towards the outer edges of the wall.

There, they loitered as if waiting for someone.

“Who could they be waiting for?”

“I have… no clue.”

We both took cover next to the stairs leading to the top of the walls, keenly observing the situation.

“Hmm…”

Leaning against the stairs, I pondered.

The Rebels?

Or something else?

Lost in thought, I noticed a soldier from atop the wall gradually approaching the stairs.

“Ah…”

I looked over at Luna, who was peeking out just slightly from the stairs.

I immediately pulled her into hiding.

"Ugh!"

Luna made a peculiar sound as I suddenly drew her towards me.

Ending up right before me, I quickly silenced her.

We both hid, pressing ourselves against the wall.

The muffled sound of footsteps approached.

Although I couldn't clearly see who it was, I could tell they were descending the stairs.

I held my breath, intently focusing on the footsteps.

Gradually, the sound faded into the distance.

Releasing a sigh of relief, I turned to Luna.

She was staring back, her eyes fixed intently on mine.

"Hmm?"

"Huh?"

When our eyes met, Luna swiftly sidestepped, breaking our gaze.

"Oh, I mean… I just didn't know where else to look."

She flailed her arms, seemingly embarrassed by her own explanation.

"It's okay, it was sudden."

I smiled, trying to ease the tension.

"Hehe…”

Luna chuckled uneasily, diverting her gaze.

"Hm?"

She then pointed to a spot where we had noticed someone earlier.

I followed her gesture.

The guard who had just passed was now chatting with the man who had been lurking nearby.

But there was an issue.

We were too far away to hear their conversation clearly.

I frowned, contemplating our next move.

"Should we move closer?"

Luna shook her head in response.

"We might get caught, and there's nowhere else to hide."

She began rummaging through her bag, pulling out Levian's Spellbook.

Flipping through its pages, she remarked,

"There's a spell perfect for this!"

After browsing for a while, she settled on a specific page and began channeling her mana.

The spellbook emitted a soft glow.

-Hey, I really appreciate what you did yesterday.

A faint voice sounded from the spellbook: it was their conversation.

Luna beamed with pride.

Although I didn't understand the spell she used, I gave her a thumbs up in appreciation.

We both tuned in, focusing on the conversation.

-Thanks to you, I got some fine liquor.

Liquor?

Nothing seemed too unusual at this point.

I was suspicious of the man we had followed, but maybe he was just an off-duty soldier.

-And that lady, she was really something.

-Heh, looks like you enjoyed her company.

"Enjoyed?"

Luna tilted her head, puzzled.

-That woman… what a beauty.

My eyes widened in disbelief.

Doubting my ears, I caught Luna's equally surprised gaze.

Her face was gradually turning red.

Reacting quickly, I covered Luna's ears, urging,

"Don't listen."

"W-what?"

Luna's eyes darted in confusion as I blocked her hearing.

-Ugh, seriously—.

I couldn't help but frown.

I hadn't come here to listen to such vulgar talk.

While covering Luna's ears, listening to their indecent chatter made me feel oddly embarrassed as well.

"R-Rudy, is it over now?"

Luna stared at me, her expression puzzled.

However, the two of them hadn't stopped their crude conversation.

I tilted my head slightly, forcing an awkward smile.

Seeing my reaction, Luna couldn't help but smile too.

-More importantly, did you bring it?

It?

I quickly focused on their changed topic.

-Do you have any idea how hard it was to get this?

-‘That person’ probably got it, right? Why are you trying to make it a big deal?

I released Luna's ears.

-Whatever, just handle it with care. The blast radius is surprisingly large, so be cautious.

-Understood. Any word from the rebels?

-As usual. They're counting on us.

The two exchanged pleasantries before parting.

Watching them leave, my frown deepened.

The matters unfolding in the shadows:

Explosives.

Rebels.

And 'that person'?

Who is 'that person'?

"How did the meeting go?"

"Meeting? It was just a meal."

Locke's father, the head of the Lucarion family, Darren Lucarion, said with a chuckle.

Locke looked at his father and posed a question.

"I heard Astina was there."

"Yes, she's quite assertive. One shouldn't underestimate her because of her young age and gender."

Darren was a seasoned veteran from the North.

In front of him, Astina confidently voiced her opinions without faltering.

She didn't blindly accept Darren's views just because he was a veteran.

She critically evaluated the validity of his suggestions logically, accepting them if they were sound and refuting them if they were not.

Darren appreciated Astina's forthright attitude.

Even if Astina was the promising successor of a viscount family, she was still relatively inexperienced.

He had assumed she would mostly be in a learning position during the beast invasion.

He had underestimated her.

"It seems the empire is slowly transitioning to a new generation."

Darren had been through so much that it was difficult for him to think as flexibly as Astina.

He often relied on his past experiences over logical judgment, favoring consistency over change.

Yet, seeing how Astina approached things, he felt it might soon be time to hand the reins over to the younger generation.

Seeing his father smile, Locke opened his mouth.

"Why didn't Cedric attend this time?"

"Cedric, you say?"

Cedric.

He was known as the Mercenary King.

Cedric always returned to the North whenever there was threat of a beast invasion.

But he was absent from today's gathering.

A place where someone of Cedric's stature should've certainly been present.

It was a meal to which many notable figures and those with extensive northern experience were invited.

This gathering was meant for sharing information, primarily about the north and the impending beast raid.

But Cedric was nowhere in sight.

Cedric hailed from the North.

Everyone affectionately called him the 'migratory bird'.

A bird that returns to its homeland whenever magical beasts loom.

However, this year, there was no sign of Cedric.

"He might be busy. Maybe he's settled in another territory."

Cedric was a mercenary, a free spirit.

Even if the North was his birthplace, he was beyond any lord's control.

"As they say, no news is good news. He's probably doing well on his own."

Still, Darren's expression showed traces of concern.

Cedric was a close comrade who had stood by Darren through thick and thin.

A trusted ally especially during beast invasions.

His absence naturally worried Darren.

"We still have some time before the beast invasion. Let's wait and see."

Darren remarked with a warm smile.

“…Huh?"

I blinked in confusion.

Was I especially tired today?

I must be seeing things.

I had been wandering around the village for quite a while.

Seeing Luna tilting her head and murmuring,

"Hm? What?"

I guessed she might be feeling the same.

"It's been a while."

A woman with fiery red hair greeted, giving a casual wave.

She sat confidently, her legs crossed on a chair, wearing a broad smile.

“…Astina?"

I stared at her, my expression a mix of surprise and confusion.

CHAPTER 115
NORTHERN INVASION (6)

Luna and I looked around and eventually returned to our accommodations.

Walking so much after such a long time had taken its toll on my legs, and my mind was filled with thoughts.

Rebels and soldiers.

If one soldier could be bought out, it raised the possibility that other soldiers might have been as well.

The question was, how?

From the stories I had heard while eating skewers at a stall, one could infer the level of loyalty the local citizens had for their lord.

Something seemed odd here.

It made no sense for the soldiers to revolt against their lord when the local citizens had such a favorable opinion of him.

A few possibilities came to mind.

An enemy from within.

Someone related to the soldiers or local citizens had betrayed their lord.

Otherwise, it was unlikely that each soldier would individually betray their lord.

Perhaps someone of significant influence was behind turning the soldiers against him…

Lost in these thoughts, I started to get a headache.

"I'm so tired…”

"Same here… Let's go in and rest."

It seemed Luna's legs were aching too.

She rubbed them as we walked.

Shortly after, we arrived at our lodgings.

It was a magnificent place, clearly meant to host esteemed guests.

The moment we stepped in, we saw a luxurious lounge furnished with high-end sofas and tables.

Two individuals were seated on one of the sofas.

“…Isn't that Professor Gracie?"

Professor Gracie was talking with someone.

The person sitting opposite her had their back to the entrance, making it impossible to see their face.

However, a hint of fiery red hair was visible.

That hair instantly reminded me of Astina.

During the winter break, I received letters from Astina a few times.

But at some point, I lost contact with her.

She probably got too busy.

Being in line to inherit would undoubtedly keep her occupied.

I had wanted to share the news about becoming the student council president with her.

Still, not wanting to bother her, I eventually dropped the idea.

"Ah! Rudy, Luna, you're here?"

Suddenly, Professor Gracie, with a beaming face, waved at Luna and me.

Feeling it would be appropriate to greet her companion, I walked towards them.

The person opposite Professor Gracie turned to face us.

“…Huh?"

I stared at the individual.

Then blinked.

And stared again.

I shot Luna a puzzled glance.

Luna seemed just as taken aback as I was.

"It's been a while."

The woman with fiery red hair.

It was none other than Astina.

"Astina?"

Astina, with a smile, rose from her seat.

"It's been a long time, Rudy, Luna."

Seeing her greet us, my eyes widened in astonishment.

“…What?"

With a smile, Astina responded,

"I came to see you."

“…What?"

I was left dumbfounded by her unexpected statement.

Astina flashed a playful smile.

"Just kidding. I didn't even know you were coming. I only heard from Professor Gracie, so I came to see you."

"Ah…”

I didn't know who was being sent from the central region.

As the student council president, I naturally knew more than other people, but it was hard to get accurate news about the northern region.

Sending support from the central region to the north involved mobilizing troops.

It was confidential.

Of course, it wasn't a massive secret, but still, confidential information wasn't easily accessible.

Perhaps Astina found my surprised face amusing because she giggled.

I narrowed my eyes and stared back.

"Astina, you seem to have become even more cunning."

"Have I?"

Astina smiled.

There was something different about her since her time at the academy.

She seemed more poised and mature.

The outfit she wore might have contributed to this.

Most times I'd seen Astina, she was in casual clothes or the academy uniform.

But now, she wore formal attire, exuding an aristocratic aura.

"I heard you became the student council president."

Astina approached me slowly, placing her hand on my head.

"Seems like you're quite determined."

"I did say, didn't I? That I'd take responsibility."

"Good, keep that attitude."

Astina teased, tapping my head.

"Do you see me as a child, patting my head like that?"

Technically, it felt more like she was just touching my hair rather than patting it.

It didn't feel bad.

Regardless of what others thought, at the academy, Astina was at the top.

It was an honor to be acknowledged by someone like her.

"So, Astina, are you here representing the central support troops?"

"Exactly. I'm here as the representative."

I nodded in understanding.

Typically, when a region offers support, it's rare for the Lord to come personally.

Usually, they'd just send a knight from their family if they wanted to establish a good relationship with the North.

Being here meant she had some leeway in her training as a successor.

If she's recognized as the representative of the central region, it indirectly means that they acknowledge her as the future head of the family.

It's virtually the same as inheriting the family title.

It was just a matter of timing.

This might be the perfect opportunity.

Successfully defending against the monsters this time could earn her full recognition from the central nobles.

Up till now, most of Astina's achievements were from her time at the academy.

But there's a distinct difference between the academy and the outside world.

She couldn't just rest on her laurels from the academy once she was out in society.

Achievements in the academy were undeniably important.

However, if someone who shone at the academy couldn't produce any notable results once outside, then those achievements became meaningless.

It's a fairly straightforward concept when you think about it.

Even if someone had stellar grades at the academy, if they couldn't apply it in real situations, they were pointless.

Considering this, there wasn't much to worry about Astina, as she seemed capable in real-life situations as well.

She'll surely prove her worth in the upcoming beast attack.

"Since you're here as a representative, where will you be staying?"

"Ah, we were just discussing that."

"…Pardon?"

Gracie then interrupted our conversation.

"Astina has decided to stay here!"

“Is that so?”

“…Here?”

While I reacted nonchalantly, Luna's response seemed slightly strained.

Astina, noticing Luna’s reaction, smiled faintly, leaning in to whisper something into Luna’s ear.

Luna’s eyes widened in surprise at whatever Astina whispered.

After sharing her secret, Astina took a step back.

Luna glared at Astina, clenching her fists.

"You… never!"

I tilted my head in confusion, puzzled by Luna's behavior.

Although Luna and Astina weren't particularly close, they weren't on bad terms either.

It was puzzling to see Luna react this way.

I looked at Astina,

"What did you tell her?"

"It's a secret between us girls,"

Astina playfully placed her index finger on her lips.

I wondered what it was that needed to be kept a secret.

"If you’re staying here, we’ll have plenty of time to chat."

"That's true. There are things I’d like to hear as well."

"Sounds good."

Then Luna grabbed my sleeve.

"Rudy! Aren't you tired? Yawn~ We walked around so much today; I'm exhausted."

Luna exaggerated a yawn while addressing me.

"Am I tired?… Maybe a little?"

"See? Why don't we go in and sleep? We can chat tomorrow; it's not too late."

After a moment of thought, I replied,

"But, it's been a while since we've seen Astina. I'd like to catch up for a bit."

"Hehe…"

Astina responded with a pleased smile.

"Why don't you head to bed, Luna? I'd like some private time to chat with Rudy. Just the two of us."

Luna looked shocked at that.

"Alright, Luna. If you're tired, you should get some rest."

I thought it was a reasonable suggestion.

However, Luna's reaction was completely unexpected.

"No! Actually, I'm not tired at all! I just said that because I was worried about you, Rudy~."

Luna confidently raised her arm to show off her biceps.

It was a pose to showcase her muscles, but Luna's biceps looked soft, lacking any muscle definition.

She had the muscle strength typical of a wizard.

We settled into the lobby and began to chat.

From the incident where I was kidnapped in Astina's absence to the story of how I defeated Yuni and became the student council president, I shared everything.

I detailed it slowly and thoroughly.

Once I'd shared everything, a question nagged at me.

"Speaking of which, do you know anything about Yeniel?"

"Yeniel?"

Astina tilted her head in thought.

"Yeniel hasn't returned from the Rebels."

"I don't know her exact whereabouts."

I pondered, stroking my chin.

"Speaking of which, even in the northern region…"

"Hmm…"

Just as I was about to delve into the topic of the Rebels in the northern region, I heard a rustling sound nearby.

Looking over, I saw Luna, leaning and seemingly dozing off by the sofa.

Seeing her in such a state, I couldn't help but smile.

"If you're tired, you should go to bed instead of sleeping here."

As I mumbled that to myself, Astina giggled softly.

"Please, take good care of Luna."

Astina's voice was warm.

I replied confidently.

"Isn't that a given?"

Luna had always been a great help to me.

It was only right I repay her kindness.

"Also, observe closely."

“…Pardon?"

"Pay close attention to your surroundings."

Astina smiled faintly.

"You'll see so much more if you do."

A man donned a hood.

His muscular physique was evident, even beneath the cloak, and his gait radiated confidence.

His appearance clearly hinted at him being a knight.

Despite his attempt to hide it, the aura he exuded was undeniable.

The knight knocked on the door of a humble shack.

“Is anyone home?”

The door opened to reveal a man with a prominent scar over one eye.

The knight greeted the man with a nod.

“Cedric, it's been a while.”

“It hasn’t been that long since we last met.”

“The last time we spoke, it was still chilly. Now the weather’s turning warmer, hasn’t

it been a while?”

Their last meeting had been during a gathering hosted by the Lord of Lucarion, Darren, concerning The Rebels.

The hooded knight entered the shack, and then asked a question.

“Is everything progressing as planned?”

“It's going so well that it's unsettling.”

Cedric said with a chuckle.

"If there's any bad news, it's just that our leader had a bit of trouble."

“The Leader?”

“Yes. He fought with the Principal of Liberion Academy.”

“Was he badly injured?”

“He lost a leg.”

The knight furrowed his brows.

"That's very unfortunate."

“For now, the Leader has decided not to come here.”

“Hmm… Is that a good idea? The new recruit from central seems competent."

Cedric laughed dismissively.

“She's just a kid."

“Also, there’s talk about Professor Gracie from the Academy…”

“Enough.”

Cedric cut him off.

“Don’t worry. I’ve heard that the rebels are sending a skilled wizard our way. You just focus on your duties.”

“…Understood.”

The knight nodded, heading back towards the door.

“Just so you know, I'll be quite busy soon, so I might not be able to visit.”

“Alright, let's meet on ‘that day’ then.”

‘That day.’

It referred to the day of the beast's invasion.

And also, the day they would commence their grand plan.

The day that would mark the true beginning of the rebellion.

The knight gave a slight bow before leaving the shack, swiftly disappearing from sight.

He swiftly left the area, trying not to draw attention, but someone was already watching.

“Hmm…”

Locke, with his hood pulled low, observed the shack.

Locke clearly saw everything.

The knight, hooded, sneaking around to avoid being noticed, and inside that shack, there was no mistaking Cedric's face.

The prominent scar across his eye.

Locke clearly recognized that scar as Cedric's.

Heaving a sigh, Locke muttered to himself.

“Things are getting complicated…”

He then gazed up at the sky.

CHAPTER 116
NORTHERN INVASION (7)

Locke came to see us early in the morning.

"A traitor."

"I've briefly discussed it with my father already. I thought Astina should know, so I came."

Saying this, Locke glanced to the side.

"Why are you two acting like this?"

Locke looked at us with narrowed eyes.

Luna and I looked back at him, giggling.

The reason for our laughter?

Astina gave a soft smile.

"I've already heard a bit from them."

“…Already?"

Last night.

After I took Luna back to her room, I had a short conversation with Astina.

The topic was about an enemy within our ranks.

And the scene we witnessed.

A traitorous soldier, and speculation that someone was orchestrating it all.

I relayed everything to Astina.

"Well, these two might not know all the details, but they did know some key pieces of information."

"Key information?"

I responded, seeing the questioning look on Locke's face.

"Magic tools."

As I said this, Luna, who was beside me, took out a notebook and showed it to everyone.

"There's a magic tool installed on the city wall."

In the notebook Luna presented, there was a drawing of the magic circle carved onto the magic tool.

Of course, it wasn't the complete magic circle detailing all its functionalities.

Extracting the exact magic circle from the tool is almost impossible.

The only discernible part was the central rune.

Just enough to understand the magic circle's capability.

But that was enough.

"What kind of magic is it?"

To Locke's question, Luna replied.

"It's explosive magic."

"They probably aim to bring down the city wall."

I added to Luna's statement.

"The city wall…?"

"Yes, that magic tool is currently installed on the wall."

We followed the soldier who had received the magic tool.

That soldier, holding the tool, went back towards the wall.

He checked his surroundings and then removed a brick from the wall.

When the brick was taken out, an opening was revealed, into which he placed the magic tool.

After he left, we inspected the magic tool.

A round-shaped magic tool.

A bomb meant to destroy the wall.

"But, why did you leave the magic tool there?"

"In case they check it and find it missing."

I said with a smirk.

"We have to get rid of them all at once."

When dealing with pests, you can't just pick them off one by one.

You need to be swift and thorough.

That way, they won't have time to react or hide.

So, you need to eliminate them entirely without leaving a trace.

"So, the issue is that 'Mercenary King' and one of your knights?"

I gestured a slashing motion across my throat.

"Now that we know their plan, let's take them out."

At my words, Astina also chimed in.

“Central can help since it's related to the rebels.”

Yet, Locke's face didn't seem hopeful.

“What do you plan to do with the beasts if we deal with them now?”

Seeing Locke's expression, Astina quietly spoke.

“…Are many soldiers involved?”

“The knight in question holds a significant rank, and he has many soldiers under him.”

At Locke's words, Luna cocked her head.

“…Why? Can't we just get reinforcements from Central?”

In response to Luna's question, I shook my head.

“The beast attack will happen soon. It would take time to bring in additional soldiers, and the beasts could strike before they arrive.”

Mobilizing a large group of soldiers isn't simple; many factors must be considered.

Especially now, when we’re uncertain about the rebels' next move.

It's not feasible to withdraw a large force from just one territory.

We'd need to pull small numbers from multiple territories.

If we waited for Central to oversee these movements, it would be too time-consuming.

So, the only help from Central was the soldiers Astina brought, along with a few knights and nobles.

But they weren’t weak.

After some thought, Astina spoke in a low voice.

"When the beasts attack, the rebels might use a different strategy."

If we preemptively strike the rebels, they might retaliate in an unexpected manner.

If they have hidden troops nearby for a surprise attack, we'd be dealing with an enemy of unknown strength.

"So, are we waiting until the beasts attack?”

Locke remained silent, seemingly in agreement with Astina's point.

Facing them as the magical beasts attack…

It's a risky strategy.

Dealing with both beasts and rebels simultaneously wasn’t easy.

Even if we knew most of their plan, it was a dangerous operation.

However, I found myself somewhat agreeing with Locke.

If many soldiers were purged before the beasts attacked, morale would plummet.

During the skirmish with the beasts, the idea that someone might stab them in the back would take root.

It's hard to make a move with a significant battle looming.

“Can't we at least capture that knight?”

"That’s doable. That's the plan, in fact."

"But if he goes missing, wouldn't the others notice?"

“I've thought of that too. Capturing him is the priority. We don't want our own men fighting each other during the battle.”

In the midst of this conversation, Professor Gracie, who was beside us, raised her hand.

“Let's say the war goes well.”

She tilted her head, asking,

"Who will guard our rear?"

All of us turned to look intently at Professor Gracie.

A figure who had no specific role in the battle with the beasts and would be positioned in the rear.

She's highly regarded in the academy and became a royal wizard at a young age.

Such a talent that Professor Cromwell personally scouted her.

“…Why are you all looking at me?"

"I've heard quite a lot about Professor Gracie from Professor Cromwell."

Astina said with a smile.

"I'm counting on you."

Lucarion Mansion.

A choked gasp echoed.

Darren Lucarion, the head of the Lucarion family, was wielding a sword.

Before him lay a knight, covered in blood.

Darren wiped the blood from his blade.

"Lord… I beg your forgiveness… Please… spare my life…”

In what seemed like an invitation for dinner and conversation at the mansion, Darren unexpectedly attacked the knight.

Caught off guard, the knight couldn't defend against Darren's sudden onslaught.

He was overwhelmed even before he could draw his own sword.

Of course, even fully armed and prepared, the knight would never have been a match for Darren.

There were only a few who could hope to challenge the seasoned Darren in a duel.

"I won't kill you right away."

Upon Darren's signal, Locke stepped out from the shadows, approaching slowly.

"You'll likely end up begging for death."

"My Lord…!!!"

"Tell me everything you know. If you do, I promise a swift, painless death."

"Lord!!!!!!!!!"

The knight was then dragged away by Locke.

Darren sighed heavily.

The pain of betrayal from someone he had trusted was a heavy blow.

It was agonizing to realize he had been backstabbed by someone he'd trusted so deeply.

Moreover…

"Cedric… Why did you make this choice…"

Darren had always considered Cedric as close as a brother.

Having fought life-threatening battles together every four years, their bond was even deeper than that of siblings.

They'd celebrated victories and shared drinks after the battles.

To think that Cedric, who was like a brother, was now plotting against him was a devastating revelation.

"Since you aimed for the lives of me and the people of the territory…"

Darren stared at his bloodied sword.

"I won't stand by idly."

He had set explosive magic on the walls, lured in the rebels, and then planned a major offensive during the magical beast invasion.

If Cedric's plan had come to fruition, not just Darren, but his son Locke, his wife, and all the people of the territory would have faced annihilation.

Darren couldn't forgive Cedric for orchestrating such treachery.

Had Cedric targeted only him, Darren might have listened, perhaps even sympathized.

But this was a different matter.

Darren couldn't find it in himself to forgive.

Time passed quickly.

Inside a tent where a meeting was in full swing.

A soldier rushed in.

"My Lord… They are approaching."

Darren let out a sigh.

As he stood up, the expressions of those around him tightened.

The magical beasts.

They had come.

"Proceed as planned."

Upon Darren's order, those seated began leave the tent.

Once everyone had left, only two individuals remained.

"My Lord."

Astina and Darren.

Only the two of them.

"Then, I'll proceed as planned."

Darren nodded in acknowledgment.

"Please ensure the safety of my son and our people."

"I entrust the front lines to you."

"Don't worry about those creatures; holding them off is my specialty."

Instead of following the others, Astina exited through the back of the tent.

Darren, after watching Astina leave, stepped outside himself.

He was clad in black armor.

And he gripped a long sword in his hand.

His presence commanded the attention of those around.

With every step, his armor clanked, drawing the gazes of nearby soldiers.

Darren moved with deliberate slowness, heading to the command post atop the city gates.

Ascending with each step, he reached his destination, taking in the view beyond the

walls.

Outside, a vast plain stretched out.

A barren land with not a single blade of grass or tree in sight.

Darren's gaze settled on the distant horizon.

At the end of his sightline, a horde of beasts loomed.

Swarming dark masses.

Their numbers were staggering, well into the tens of thousands.

"My Lord, here is your helmet."

A soldier beside him handed Darren a helmet.

A black helmet that matched his armor.

Darren surveyed his surroundings.

There were soldiers filled with fear, while others swallowed, their faces tense.

Darren took the helmet, and then spoke up.

"Warriors, are you afraid?"

"If we let fear control us, everything behind us—our homes, our families—will be lost."

"They will be overrun and taken from us."

"But if we muster just a bit more courage, such a fate will not come to pass."

Darren donned the helmet.

"Warriors of the North, our allies who've come to aid us."

"As it has always been, as we've always shown,"

"Only victory lies before us."

Darren, with the helmet on, raised his sword high.

"Bring death to the enemy!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

CHAPTER 117
NORTHERN INVASION (8)

"Aaaaaahhhhhhhh!!!!"

The entire castle echoed with a piercing scream.

That was the signal that the battle had begun.

But outside the castle walls, another group was stirring.

"Is everyone ready?"

A man with a prominent scar on his eye.

Cedric had his sword at the ready.

He was not alone in the dimly lit space; many others stood by his side.

They were mercenaries.

Men who'd do almost anything if the price was right.

However, even for a good sum, there were tasks they'd refuse, especially those with high risk to their lives.

No amount of money could make them undertake missions with a high probability of death.

Yet, they were gathered here for a dangerous task.

If they failed, they would all face a grim fate.

And the reason they'd gathered despite such odds?

It was because of Cedric.

The mercenaries trusted him, drawn by his reputation as the 'King of Mercenaries'.

They believed in him and his cause.

With sword in hand, Cedric took the lead.

"We march towards freedom, towards equality, one step at a time."

What Cedric desired was freedom.

What he yearned for was equality.

A brilliant and beautiful ideology.

He was like a moth drawn to this radiant flame.

He believed in this path, in this ideal.

He thought that granting freedom to everyone was the answer.

The sacrifices made along the way, he believed, had value.

Despite all obstacles, he relentlessly pursued this path, this belief.

With that, Cedric led his band from the darkness towards the light.

Their hideout was in a cave nearby.

The castle's forces were currently occupied by beasts at the main gate.

That left the rear gate almost unguarded.

Moreover, the few soldiers there had already been bribed.

"Let's move forward, towards freedom,"

Cedric declared.

Exiting the cave, they made their way towards the woods.

A forest lay between the castle and the cave.

Unlike the dense northern woods, this was merely an area with evergreens.

As they were about to enter the forest, a figure stumbled out, looking as if they had been pushed.

"Uh… ah…”

"Who goes there?!"

Cedric pointed his sword at the figure.

At his command, the mercenaries behind him also drew their weapons.

"Ah… it's just that…”

It was Gracie.

"Ahaha… seems I might've lost my way a bit."

"Professor, please, show some dignity."

Another figure emerged from behind her.

“…Locke?"

Cedric looked in surprise at Locke.

His close friend's… Darren's son.

Seeing his face brought a rush of emotions.

"Locke, you shouldn't be here."

Cedric lowered his sword as he spoke.

He didn't want to harm Locke.

Darren had been his close friend, but he had to be a stepping stone for freedom.

For the rebel's plan to proceed, it was unavoidable.

But Locke was a different matter.

He was still young.

It was a time in his life meant for joy and exploration.

Cedric thought that, in the future, if Locke chose to seek revenge for his father, it would be justified.

He was sure that if he killed Darren now, he would become Locke's enemy, and Cedric was prepared for the retribution that would follow.

But that would be after freeing the world.

Now wasn't the time.

"Locke, flee now while you still can. I won't chase you."

He advised.

At this, Locke drew his sword.

"What are you talking about? Can't you see I'm here to stop you?"

Even towards Cedric, a mere commoner, Locke addressed him with respect.

It was the minimum courtesy he owed.

A courtesy for the man who was a close friend of his father.

Cedric's expression darkened as he gazed at Locke,

“If you try to stop me, even you won’t be spared."

Locke replied with a smirk,

“Didn't you used to call us the ‘foolish father-son duo’?”

Cedric frowned deeper upon hearing Locke’s words, reminded of the past.

Conversations he had shared with Darren’s family over meals.

"Why bring that up now?"

"I'm not sure, perhaps because I'm a fool? I just have a feeling I won't be the one dying today."

Locke said, corners of his mouth turning up, and then glanced at the woman behind him, Gracie.

"Professor, shall we begin?"

“…Sigh, I didn't become a professor to do these kind of things.”

Gracie murmured, gathering her mana.

Her voice held a hint of reluctance.

Yet, in stark contrast to her words, the swirling mana around her was eerily powerful.

Mana surged around Gracie, her hair flying in the tumult.

“…What is this?"

With her eyes closed, Gracie directed her mana.

Sparks began to emit from the ground around her.

zzzt…!

The sparks multiplied, affecting the nearby vegetation and the ground itself.

Then, Gracie opened her eyes.

Her eyes were now tinted in a striking shade of blue, and her hair gradually turned white.

The mercenaries watching were wide-eyed with shock.

Their instincts told them one thing.

This was dangerous.

The experienced mercenaries could feel it.

Chills ran down their spines, their hair standing on end.

But it was already too late.

Their only mistake?

Overconfidence.

They had greater numbers, facing just a boy and a woman.

Cedric cried out,

“Everyone… everyone run…!!!”

“Lightning Strike.”

With a swift motion, Gracie released her spell.

Bolts of powerful electricity emerged from the ground and the sky, striking them down.

A chain reaction of electricity.

It overturned the ground and consumed them.

Zzzzp!!!

“Argh!”

"Help… Ahhh!!!"

Screams filled the vicinity.

"What is this… Ugh…!!"

Even Cedric couldn't escape the electric onslaught.

But unlike the helpless fallen mercenaries, he held on.

Watching Cedric's struggle, Locke spoke,

"We have Professor 'Lightning Gracie', after all."

Gracie responded to Locke's teasing comment with a grunt.

"Ugh."

Lightning Gracie.

That was the nickname Astina heard from Cromwell and shared with everyone about Gracie Lifegold.

A moniker Gracie held back during her academy days.

Despite being under the tutelage of Professor Cromwell, Gracie never practiced telekinetic magic.

Well, to be precise, she learned it but chose not to use it.

It was simply a matter of preference.

Gracie just didn't resonate with telekinetic magic.

To her, it felt as ill-fitting as wearing clothes not suited for her.

However, it's not like the telekinetic magic was of no use.

She created many utility spells with it.

But she never used it in combat and other things.

Instead, she focused on lightning magic.

That's how she earned her nickname.

Rejecting Professor Cromwell's teachings and harnessing lightning.

A mage who swept everyone in academy duels using lightning magic.

Among her juniors and peers, she gained the moniker 'Lightning Gracie.'

That very Gracie Lifegold was now a novice teacher in her first year at the academy.

"It's started."

"Seems so."

Luna and I were inside the castle.

Not a single sign of movement could be observed within its walls.

Though it was daytime, there was no sign of anyone.

All the inhabitants seemed to have taken shelter in their homes.

“It feels eerily quiet like this.”

It was odd.

Despite being in the midst of a usually bustling area during broad daylight, we couldn’t sense a single presence.

The distant sounds of combat were unmistakably clear, making the atmosphere even more unsettling.

Luna seemed to agree with me, nodding in response.

After observing Luna’s expression for a moment, I rose from my seat.

“Shall we get going?”

Our reason for being here, without even a single soldier accompanying us, was for The Rebels.

Three groups participated in this uprising.

One consisted of Cedric's mercenaries, another of betrayers from the noble families, and the last was The Rebels.

Initially, the leader of The Rebels was supposed to personally bring troops here.

Their plan was to destroy the castle gates, unleash monsters upon the territory, and in the midst of the chaos, Cedric would assassinate Darren Lucarion, the lord.

This would send the central and northern troops into confusion, leaving the citizens exposed to the monster threat.

Then the Rebels would appear, exterminate the monsters, and emerge as heroes.

That was their narrative.

However, that storyline was already disrupted.

Firstly, we received the good news that the leader of The Rebels had been gravely injured and couldn't make it here.

So, it promised to be an easier battle than anticipated.

We moved slowly, but with a sense of purpose.

Towards the slums.

That’s where we were headed.

According to a traitorous knight, The Rebels had already infiltrated the castle.

They had been distributing food to the citizens and manipulating public opinion.

It seemed like the Rebels were preparing to make their move.

But they might just keep preparing forever.

Because the signal for action might never come.

Cedric, The Rebels, and even the knights who were supposed to be battling monsters—all were waiting for a signal.

The signal was the sound of a magical device that would bring down the castle walls.

But that device had already been removed from the walls.

Most likely, the Lord had it now.

Luna and I located a particular house in the slums.

It was the one Locke had previously identified for us.

It was originally where Cedric was hiding, but now, we'd heard, someone else occupied it.

“Luna.”

“Yes!”

Luna opened her spellbook.

She then cast a silence spell.

This ensured that no sound would escape from near the shack.

So they thought they could ambush us?

Did they think we would just sit back and let it happen?

Not a chance.

An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, an ambush for an ambush.

“Let’s do this.”

I channeled my mana.

And reached out towards the shack.

It had been a while since I last used dark magic.

Drawing upon the mana within me, I released an appropriate amount.

The perfect amount.

Measured precisely.

It felt right.

Perhaps because I was in such good form, the mana within me moved as if it were a part of my very body.

Slowly, I raised my hand, pointing it at the shack.

A large circle appeared on it.

Soon after, a light emanated from the circle.

I uttered the incantation.

“Flame of Destruction.”

BOOOOM!

Where the shack once stood, a pillar of black flames surged upwards.

CHAPTER 118
NORTHERN INVASION (9)

A pillar of black flames erupted from beneath the cabin, shattering it into fragments.

I gazed at the flaming remains.

Emerging from the flames was a figure in a robe, a girl wearing a pointed hat resembling those worn by witches.

She appeared quite young.

In her hand, she held a staff adorned with a large gemstone.

"What is this?"

Shielding herself with a barrier, the girl, with a furrowed brow, stepped out from between the flames.

"Hmm…"

She had clearly been hit with dark magic, yet she walked out from the flames without a single scratch.

"Who are you people?"

The girl asked, narrowing her eyes at us.

Instead of answering, I asked back,

"Who are you?"

The girl looked at me incredulously.

"Really?… You attacked without even knowing who I am? Is this how youngsters behave these days?"

I was taken aback by her words.

She looked younger than us, but she referred to us as 'youngsters,' which was quite absurd.

First, I gathered my thoughts to grasp the situation.

She had been ambushed and directly hit by dark magic, but the girl emerged unscathed.

Either she was overwhelmingly powerful, or she specialized in defensive magic.

As I pondered the situation, the girl alternated her gaze between Luna and me, then spoke.

"If you attacked out of the blue, I assume you're enemies?"

With a swift motion, she swung the staff in her hand.

Mana began to swirl.

From her, figures emerged as if she was made of smoke.

“…What's this?"

The smoke-like entities transformed to look exactly like the girl.

The smoke-clones then emitted more smoke from their bodies, replicating themselves in what seemed like a cloning technique.

Luna urgently shouted,

"Rudy! It's illusion magic!"

The scene was now filled with dozens of figures resembling the girl.

They all reached out their hands.

"Fireball."

Dozens of fire orbs hurtled towards us.

"Barrier."

I uttered the word calmly.

The fire balls collided with my barrier.

Yet, only two impacts were felt on the barrier.

This meant that not only the girl but also the fire balls were illusions.

"Hmm…"

The only offensive spell she used freely amidst the illusions was fireball.

It seemed more likely now that she primarily focused on defensive magic.

But I couldn't be sure just yet.

For now, I needed to deal with these illusory duplicates.

"Priscilla."

Behind me, blue droplets started to gather.

These tiny droplets combined, growing larger, and began to take on the shape of a wolf.

That wolf was Priscilla.

Surveying the surroundings, Priscilla spoke,

"What should I do?"

I responded firmly.

"Eliminate them all."

"As the contractor wishes."

Priscilla spoke with an unusual sense of authority.

Immediately after, a chilling wind began to blow.

Despite it clearly being a time when spring transitioned into summer.

Countless ice spikes formed around Priscilla.

These spikes soared towards all the girls in the vicinity.

Crack!

All the girls except one were impaled by the ice spikes.

One of them erected a barrier to repel the ice, while the others looked like mirages, their forms wavering where the ice had struck them.

That one girl, seemingly intrigued, rubbed her chin and remarked,

"Oh? An elemental?"

Her tone was oddly reminiscent of an old person's.

"For a young one, you seem to possess quite a formidable elemental, don't you?"

Though she had the appearance of a young girl, her speech was that of a wise old sage.

Her demeanor also showcased her experienced nature.

"Shall we have a proper battle then?"

The girl let out a sly grin.

"Let me show you the power of the great sorcerer Jefrin."

…Jefrin?

"Huh?"

Luna, standing next to Rudy, looked perplexed.

However, there was no time to ask further.

"Let's see whose ice magic is superior."

The girl who introduced herself as Jefrin raised her hand skyward.

"Spear of Severe Cold."

Just as when Priscilla cast her spell earlier, blue orbs began to gather above the girl's head.

The surrounding temperature plummeted, even colder than when Priscilla had used her magic.

"Rudy, that magic is…"

"Yeah, I know."

It was one of the most potent ice spells.

I had studied about ice magic before, particularly to understand the abilities Priscilla could harness.

And that spell, the Spear of Severe Cold, was among the trickier ones in the domain of ice magic.

If that ice spear struck the ground, everything around would freeze instantly, turning even a summer day to feel like the depths of winter.

"But, there's no way that's real, right?"

We had just confirmed that she uses illusion magic.

If she was truly proficient in ice magic, she would've begun with that instead.

It's common to lead with one's primary magic.

"But still…"

Luna's concerns were understandable.

The cold we were feeling felt very real.

Even if the rest was an illusion, her mastery over illusionary magic was undeniable.

I had once heard a story: A person felt cold and even froze to death in a warm place simply because the thermometer indicated below freezing.

It was a matter of perception.

However, we were aware that this was an illusion.

Yet, the cold was palpable.

If that spear descends, we might feel an even more intense cold.

"Hehe…"

Jefrin let out a chuckle.

And with that, she swung her arm downward.

The blue spear floating in the sky began to fall.

I must stop it.

"Priscil…"

"I'll handle it!"

Just as I was about to block the spear with Priscilla, Luna shouted.

A spellbook was already open in Luna's hands, emitting a radiant glow.

Bang!

The surrounding air seemed to explode with a resounding echo.

Sonic Boom.

A technique that emits a powerful soundwave.

Though usually, it doesn't inflict major damage unless it hits directly.

However, Luna’s magic was enhanced with a magic circle.

It was potent enough to strike everything around.

The weakness of illusion magic:

If the core of the illusion magic is struck in any manner, the illusion disappears.

For illusion magic typically employed via a magical tool, one simply needs to strike that tool.

If the wizard themselves conjures the illusion, they become the core.

In other words, if the wizard is hit, the illusion vanishes.

Perhaps that's why Jefrin was adept at using defensive magic.

But this time, Jefrin couldn't defend against Luna's spell.

Sonic Boom is a spell that strikes with the speed of sound.

Furthermore, Luna's spell isn't one where she has to chant an incantation.

She merely infuses mana into the spellbook to activate it.

Jefrin had no time to react.

She was directly hit by Luna's spell.

“Ugh!”

“Huh?”

Though the attack landed successfully, something seemed off about where the sound came from.

Jefrin's voice came from right behind us.

The girl's figure that was before us and the spear hovering in the sky shimmered and disappeared.

I quickly channeled mana into my feet, attempting to spin and counterattack.

"It's already too late."

Jefrin's staff struck my head faster than I could complete my kick.

No, it wasn’t so much a strike as it was a gentle tap.

"Eternal Sleep."

Before I could fully execute my move, my consciousness began to blur.

It felt as if a switch was flipped off in my head.

Before my eyes, I saw Jefrin smiling.

"Sweet dreams~."

I lost consciousness.

Astina quickly made her way towards Rudy.

Their strategy was for Rudy to ambush the rebels first, and then for Astina to join in and finish them off.

They had originally planned for Astina to join the initial assault, but they decided on a surprise attack led by Rudy, thinking that Cedric and the rebels with him might have a means of communication.

However, this turned out to be a mistake.

"Rudy?"

From a distance, she saw Rudy falling, struck down by a staff wielded by a young wizard.

Fury welled up inside Astina.

How dare they hurt…?

Astina began to harness a vast amount of mana.

Even while she had been receiving her heir lessons, Astina never neglected her magic training.

During her second year, she was already as strong as, if not stronger than, the third years.

Now, she had grown even more formidable.

"What the…"

Jefrin felt the overpowering surge of mana and turned to see its source.

Her eyes landed on a woman.

A woman with fiery red hair.

She was hovering in the sky, glaring down at him.

She looked extremely… extremely angry.

With Astina moving such a vast amount of mana, even the rebels, who had been previously oblivious due to the silencing spell, began to emerge one by one.

Even ordinary soldiers, typically insensitive to magic, could feel the magnitude of this mana.

In a calm voice, Astina uttered,

"Gravity Field."

"Ah…"

Jefrin let out a sigh of resignation.

CHAPTER 119
NORTHERN INVASION (10)

The scene looked like a devastated slum.

Shattered homes lay around, pieces of wood strewn everywhere.

All around, people lay unconscious or dazed.

"Why are you here, of all places? Don't you have anything better to do?"

Jefrin found herself overpowered by Astina, who had taken away her staff.

She was taken aback by Astina's capabilities.

With such power, Astina could easily be seen as one of the top talents anywhere.

Judging by her youthful appearance, she could potentially become the empire's most formidable wizard in the future.

Why was someone of her caliber in the Northern region?

Even with the invasion of monsters, someone of her stature wouldn't typically be here.

Jefrin was confident that in a fair fight, she could take her on.

But circumstances weren't in her favor.

She had already sustained damage from Rudy's surprise attack.

Her illusion spell was interrupted precisely at its most vulnerable moment.

As if that weren't enough, Astina appeared right after she cast a major spell.

It was the worst-case scenario.

The spell Jefrin used was called 'Eternal Sleep' – a magic spell to trap someone in an endless slumber.

It was a hallucination spell that consumed an immense amount of mana.

Right after casting it, Astina launched her attack, right when she was defenseless.

Astina looked down at Jefrin, her eyes cold and calculating.

Jefrin was pinned to the ground by Astina's magic.

Astina pressed her foot against Jefrin's back.

"Who are you?"

Astina's expression was one of confusion.

She had clearly sensed a massive amount of mana when Jefrin had swung her staff.

Seeing that massive amount of mana enveloping Rudy, Astina was overwhelmed by a rush of emotions, fearing that something dire had happened to him.

But, when she arrived…

"Rudy, wake up!"

"Uh…"

Luna was fervently shaking Rudy, who lay unconscious on her lap.

He just seemed to be sleeping soundly.

So, Astina was left wondering.

What was that immense mana that enveloped Rudy?

It clearly passed through him, but all he did was fall asleep.

There were no visible injuries, and he looked peaceful.

Astina turned her attention back to Jefrin, pressing her harder under her foot.

"What did you do to Rudy?"

"Heh…”

Jefrin looked up at Astina with a smirk.

"You're asking pretty arrogantly, aren't you?"

Astina chuckled at her comment.

"Oh? Was I too arrogant for you?"

Seeing Astina's expression, a chill ran down Jefrin's spine.

Despite her smiling face, there was an overwhelming aura of menace and terror.

Astina reached for Jefrin's staff, which lay beside them, and brought its gem-end close to her mouth.

"If I set off a few fireballs inside your mouth using this, would I come across as more polite?"

“What…?”

Astina firmly grasped Jefrin's face.

“Ugh!”

Holding both her cheeks, she forced open her mouth and inserted the gem at the end of the staff inside.

“Mmmph!!! Mmph!!!”

Muffled screams escaped Jefrin, the gem trapped between her teeth.

Her garbled words were unintelligible. Her face, however, clearly displayed sheer terror.

“Why the fuss? Shall I let one off just for a start?”

Astina taunted, her grin ever widening.

“Mmph! Mmph!!!”

Jefrin, stricken with fear, squirmed and thrashed.

‘She’s seriously going to do it…!!!’

The rage was evident in Astina's eyes, even amidst her smile.

Those eyes suggested she might actually unleash the magic.

Given her expression, she wouldn’t put it past her.

As Jefrin struggled, Astina’s face soured.

“Stay still.”

“Mmph! Mmph!”

Even at her command, Jefrin moved desperately, as if begging for her life.

Astina studied her pitiful state for a moment before removing the staff from her mouth.

A slimy string of saliva stretched from the staff.

Astina grimaced at the sight and then refocused on Jefrin.

“Ready to talk now?”

“I-I’ll talk. Just release me when I do.”

“You want to be released?”

“Yes. I need some assurance of my safety.”

Astina brandished the staff again.

“Do you even realize your position?”

“I need a chance of survival too! Only then can I answer you!”

Jefrin's voice held a note of desperation.

‘I can't back down now…!’

She realized that even if she provided every answer she wanted, she might still die.

Astina looked down at her, weighing her options.

“Fine. Talk. What did you do to Rudy?”

Relief evident, Jefrin began,

“I used a magic called Eternal Sleep.”

“…Eternal Sleep?”

“Just as the name suggests, it puts one into an eternal slumber.”

“…What?”

The spell was unfamiliar to Astina.

She surmised it might belong to the category of illusion magic.

Pointing at Rudy, Astina demanded,

“Then undo it. If you release him, I’ll let you go.”

“I can't undo it.”

At her admission, Astina smiled eerily.

“Is that so?”

Seeing her reaction, Jefrin flinched, panic evident in her movements.

“Oh, no! Seriously, I can't undo it!”

“Well then, you should die. If you can't break it.”

Astina gathered mana in her hands.

Jefrin exclaimed hurriedly.

“Wait, wait!!! I can't, but you might be able to!”

“What?”

Astina narrowed her eyes suspiciously at Jefrin.

Could it be true?

Can someone undo a spell even when the original caster can’t?

Especially someone who isn’t well-versed in that particular magic?

"Let… Let me explain what Eternal Sleep is first…”

According to Jefrin, Eternal Sleep was a spell that made the recipient experience dreams.

Dreams.

Specifically, incredibly sweet dreams…

It would create the happiest moments of their life and lure them to remain within that dream.

The ones affected by the Eternal Sleep would willingly stay lost in their dreams.

And if they stayed in that dream state, their mind would deteriorate over time, and their body would fail from prolonged inactivity.

Thus, the magic led them into an eternal slumber.

That was the nature of Eternal Sleep.

“So, how do we break it?”

After hearing the story, Jefrin grinned awkwardly.

“Well… There are two ways to break the Eternal Sleep spell… One is by destroying the spell’s core…”

“The spell’s core?”

“The spell is implanted within that boy, constantly keeping him asleep. We need to get rid of that core.”

Astina looked at Rudy.

The core of the magic…

“That method won't work unless you're an expert.”

Astina frowned.

“Then? What’s the other way?”

Jefrin smirked at Astina.

“You need to enter his dream yourself.”

“What?”

“You have to go in and persuade him to end the dream. The spell's true nature is that if the person truly wishes to break free from the dream, they can.”

A loophole in the magic.

If one wishes to escape the dream, they can.

But this very loophole made the spell even more potent.

Who would want to leave such a dream?

Jefrin laughed.

“Think you can persuade him?”

It was Jefrin's trap.

It was nearly impossible to convince someone immersed in their happiest memories.

If Astina entered Rudy's dream, she would become trapped.

Only Rudy could end that dream.

Jefrin was trying to trap two birds with one stone.

After a brief moment of contemplation, Astina asked,

"How do I enter the dream?"

“Astina, wait!”

Luna shouted in response to Astina’s question.

"It's a trap… Please don't… Let me instead…”

Astina shook her head.

"I know."

However, she couldn't refuse.

And she couldn't let Luna take her place.

“Luna, if you enter into Rudy’s happiest moment, can you be certain you won’t get lost there?”

“…”

If Luna entered, there was a hundred percent chance she would also become trapped in that dream.

Because to her, Rudy was everything.

But Astina felt differently.

She cared for Rudy, but she had no reason to stay in a dream.

She had reasons to return to reality.

Astina smiled at Luna, saying,

“I'll be right back. If I don’t wake up in 2 hours, send the pre-arranged signal.”

The pre-arranged signal.

It was a signal to notify Professor Gracie and Lord Darren.

A signal requesting help.

She said this because she didn’t know what might happen if she fell asleep.

Astina then turned her gaze to Jefrin.

Jefrin grinned and spoke up.

"So, you'll release me if I help you enter his dream?"

“I’ll release you if you promise not to play any tricks and simply run away.”

Jefrin chuckled,

“Of course~.”

Astina dispelled the magic restraining Jefrin and helped her up.

“Then let’s make a pact.”

Astina lay beside Rudy, taking his hand in hers.

Luna watched over Astina, while Jefrin gently placed a hand above Astina's head.

"Come back soon, Astina."

Luna whispered.

A smile graced Astina's lips upon hearing Luna.

Jefrin stifled a chuckle, casting a glance at Astina.

Though Jefrin wanted to plant a strange spell in Astina for revenge, she was bound by a magic contract with Astina.

Breaking it would cause her heart to burst, so she dared not act on her impulses.

Jefrin began to channel her mana.

"When the spell is cast, you'll lose consciousness and enter the dreams of the person next to you. When you wake up, you'll find yourself within that dream."

Her mana fluctuated increasingly.

"When you open your eyes, he'll be right there. How he appears depends on his desires, probably in the way he desires to be seen."

Jefrin explained, laughing lightly.

And then, she chanted.

"Dream Intervention."

Jefrin's mana surged, emitting a brilliant light.

It entered Astina's mind, with a glow also emanating from the hand of Rudy that Astina was holding.

Grinning, Jefrin spoke.

"Have a pleasant dream."

As her words echoed, Astina felt her consciousness fading.

"Please come back safely…”

And then, Luna's voice was heard.

With that, Astina's awareness snapped, and everything went dark.

"Ugh…”

She groaned, feeling a throbbing headache.

Slowly, Astina sat up, looking around,

"Where is this…”

According to Jefrin, she'd be in a dream, and Rudy Astria would be in front of her.

Scanning her surroundings, she mumbled,

"Huh?"

A loud horn blared.

"Wow, look at her! Is that some sort of cosplay?"

"Check out her hair color!"

Murmurs filled the air around her, accompanied by the sounds of horns.

She spotted towering… structures?

Her eyes widened in surprise,

"Where… am I?"

Just then, a voice from in front of her spoke,

“…Astina?"

"Rudy?"

Astina called out Rudy's name and looked in the direction of the voice.

The tone was unmistakably Rudy's.

But…

“…What?"

Astina stared in disbelief.

Before her stood a tall adult male with black hair… dressed in a suit.

With a dazed expression, Astina asked,

"Who are you?"

In this unfamiliar place, confronted with this unfamiliar person, numerous questions swirled in Astina's mind.

CHAPTER 120
DREAM (1)

Ever since I was young, I excelled academically.

People around me called me a genius, and I even won various competitions.

However, this was only true during my childhood.

As I entered middle school and high school, I realized I was nothing more than ordinary.

Yet, I couldn't just stand still and accept it.

I believed that even without innate talent, through sheer effort, I could surpass those who had it.

If I put in multiple times the effort as someone talented, surely I could outshine them.

Otherwise, wouldn't it be too unfair?

However, contrary to my naive expectations, the world proved to be unfair.

Despite my efforts, I failed.

No matter how painfully hard I tried, I couldn't achieve my goals.

I was broken.

"Hey! You made it to Korean University Law School! Congratulations!”

“…Huh?"

I snapped back to reality.

Where am I?

Just moments ago, I was with Luna, facing off against Jefrin.

I looked around.

The bustling environment, several tables, and a glass with a green bottle of alcohol in front of me.

A familiar sight.

It's been a while…

This was a Korean bar.

"Hey, what's wrong?"

I looked up.

Sitting across from me was a friend I'd hung out with often.

Although I was busy studying every day, whenever he called, I'd come out for a drink.

This very pub…

It was where we met after I received my LEET* scores.

I had bombed the test and drowned my sorrows in alcohol, weeping bitterly.

"Hey, what's wrong?"

But now…

“…You're saying my scores qualify for Korea University's Law School?"

I was bewildered.

Korea University is the top institution in our country.

Just moments ago, I was focused on my life at the academy…

Noticing my confusion, my friend frowned.

"Are you drunk?"

Was everything I experienced just a dream?

Am I drunk?

I glanced at the bottle in front of me.

It was freshly opened, with only a small amount consumed.

The glass in front of me was filled with soju.

I hesitantly took a sip.

If this is a dream, it wouldn't have a taste, but…

"Ugh…"

"What's wrong?"

As always, the taste of soju was repulsive.

Its distinctive alcohol scent lingered around my lips.

Was this not a dream?

I hastily grabbed a spoon and dove into the side dish, shoveling it into my mouth.

The pot in front of me.

Its spicy, tangy red broth.

The taste tingled on my lips.

"Pork kimchi stew?"

"Oh… oh, oh, oh…"

Regardless of my current situation, one thing was clear.

This spicy, savory sensation…

Ah, this is definitely pork kimchi stew.

"Ma'am! One bowl of rice, please!"

"Alright~!"

As I frantically started eating, the friend sitting opposite me looked at me in disbelief.

"Have you lost your mind…?"

Whether this current situation was a dream or everything before it was, it didn't matter.

All I was grateful for was the white rice and pork kimchi stew in front of me.

The next day.

"Ah… my head…”

I groggily sat up.

My head ached, a clear sign of a hangover.

Yesterday, after having kimchi stew, I ordered various other dishes like spicy pork stir-fry, boneless chicken feet, and fried chicken gizzards.

It was inevitable that alcohol accompanied the meal.

The first sip of soju was harsh, but as I drank more, its taste became unnoticeable.

It reached a point where I couldn't tell whether the alcohol was consuming me or I was consuming it.

Sitting up, I blankly stared ahead, mulling over the memories still sharp in my mind.

"What was all that about?"

I recalled my poor performance on the exam and how, despite applying to several places, I faced rejection at every turn.

And so, to escape, I immersed myself in a game.

Sure, there are games where talent matters, but I never played those.

I preferred games where consistent effort, rather than innate skill, determined the outcome.

One such game was 'The Academy's Top Wizard', which I played obsessively, especially after my exam results.

Playing it allowed me to forget the real world.

Lost in the game one moment, the next, I found myself inside it, with no warning whatsoever.

From then on, I encountered various characters and experienced countless events.

"I remember everything that followed, but why can't I remember what happened before?"

And which reality was true?

Was I Rudy Astria or was the person here, now, the real me?

These thoughts swirled in my mind, reminiscent of the philosophical musings of Zhuangzi’s butterfly dream*.

Just then, a vibration interrupted my thoughts.

My phone was ringing.

I reached for it.

Despite it being familiar, it felt oddly alien in my hand.

The caller ID displayed 'Elder Uncle'.

“…Hello?"

“…Yes?"

"Yes?"

"Oh… I'll, I'll be right there!"

I dashed to the bathroom.

Today was my cousin's wedding.

Having lost my parents at age seven, I was raised by my uncle.

While all my other relatives turned their backs on me, my uncle had always been there.

His daughter, who was like a real sister to me, was getting married, and I was running late.

Quickly, I washed my hair, threw on the suit I wore for interviews, hastily tied a necktie, and bolted out the door.

"Damn fool…”

A resurfacing memory reminded me how, after failing the exam and drowning my sorrows in alcohol, I had once missed my close cousin's wedding due to a hangover.

I was such an idiot then.

But now, there was no reason.

At least back then, there was the sorrow of failure.

Now, I had just carelessly drunk and passed out.

I hurriedly ran out.

I had no time to discern whether this was reality or a dream.

“Which bus should I take…?”

Rapidly, I searched for the route on my phone's map app as I ran.

While I was doing so…

“Huh…?”

Suddenly, a light descended from the sky.

It resembled the light that would emanate when UFOs abducted people, or when angels descended from heaven.

Amidst that light, a figure began to descend.

A figure plummeting while lying down.

With red hair…

“Astina…?”

Even as Astina descended from the sky, the people around seemed oblivious.

Once Astina touched the ground, the light vanished.

“Oh, who's that?”

Only after the light disappeared did the crowd start noticing Astina.

I stood still, staring blankly at Astina.

“Uh…”

Slowly, Astina tried to stand, clutching her head as if experiencing a headache.

She then glanced around.

Her eyes widened in shock.

She looked like someone who had just arrived from another world.

“Where… am I?”

Seeing the usually composed Astina looking so bewildered made me chuckle.

And then, realization dawned upon me.

This is a dream.

It's not where I was before.

All the muddled thoughts started to clear up.

Smiling, I called out to her.

"Astina?"

Astina turned to look at me.

Recognizing my voice, Astina's face lit up momentarily, but her expression soon stiffened.

“Who are you?”

I reached out my hand.

“Get up, senior.”

“Rudy…?”

"That's right."

Astina took my hand and stood up.

“What's going on? And why do you look…?”

I gave her a wry smile, wondering how to explain the situation.

Should I fabricate a story? Or tell the truth?

All these thoughts raced through my mind.

Then, my phone rang.

It was my uncle.

“Hello?”

“Ah, yes. I’ll be there soon.”

“Yes, yes. I’ll take a taxi.”

After responding, I hung up.

Seeing this, Astina's eyes sparkled.

“Rudy, I might not fully understand where this is, but everything here is an illusion. We need to escape from this place…”

I laughed as she rambled on.

"Yes, seeing your face, I think I understand."

Suddenly, a past memory flashed before my eyes.

It was of a wizard named Jefrin striking my head.

And the memory of being told to have a pleasant dream.

Piecing those memories together…

“Am I… dreaming?”

Hearing my words, Astina confirmed with enthusiasm.

"Yes! We need to escape from here."

"How do we get out?"

"If you genuinely want to leave, I've heard you can do so instantly. Just think about

wanting to go back!"

"You mean… want to escape?"

I rubbed my chin thoughtfully.

Then, I focused.

I want to escape.

I want to get out…

I must leave…

"…"

"Why… are you hesitating?"

Astina looked at me with growing concern.

That same anxiety started creeping into me.

"I… can't?"

"Please, try more desperately!"

Astina and I stood in the street, trying everything we could think of.

We shouted for someone to send us back and even clasped our hands in desperate prayer.

Yet, there was no change.

I came to a realization.

Was I not feeling desperate enough?

I gazed intently at Astina.

Perhaps she felt uneasy in this unfamiliar world as she tapped her foot nervously.

Outside, she gave off the aura of a dependable senior, but here she looked just like any other girl.

In the outside world, Astina and I were about the same height.

Of course, I was still growing, so over time I would surpass her, but for now, we were similar.

Yet here, as she tapped her foot with an anxious look, she just seemed like an ordinary girl.

“Why are you staring like that…”

Astina's voice wavered as she noticed my gaze.

“It's nothing. I’m just trying to think of a way out.”

“Right…”

Astina and I began brainstorming together.

But answers didn't come easily.

“Hmm…”

I realized this was all a dream.

I had a reason to escape from here.

But I didn't feel that urgency.

Why was that?

After some reflection, I made up my mind.

"Astina, can we go somewhere for a moment?"

CHAPTER 121
DREAM (2)

"What… What is this?"

"It's called a car."

"How can it move this fast? What kind of magic is used?"

"It's not… exactly magic…"

I was in a taxi with Astina, heading to the wedding venue.

I knew the engine ran on fuel and did something to make the car move, but I didn't fully understand the mechanics behind it.

I just gave an awkward smile.

I thought I'd feel embarrassed saying that, but seeing Astina looking around in wonder, it didn't feel so bad.

Usually, Astina was the one explaining things to me.

It was a rare moment for me to share knowledge, even if it wasn't something I invented.

I felt a sense of pride.

As Astina glanced between the taxi and the outside world, she turned to me with a question.

"So, where are we?"

"Ah… It's complicated to explain…"

I scratched my cheek, wondering if she'd believe me.

Where should I start and how much should I tell?

I cautiously began,

"This is where I originally came from."

"Originally?"

Astina tilted her head in confusion.

That's when the taxi driver chimed in,

"We're here!"

"Ah, thank you."

As I exited, Astina followed, pressing me with her question again.

"What do you mean by 'where you originally came from'?"

Seeing her like this, I smiled.

"I'll explain everything slowly. But first…"

"First?"

"Would you like to meet my family?"

I pointed to the building in front of us.

"Wh-What is this place…?"

The massive building, even impressive by my standards, was the venue where my cousin's wedding was being held—a grand hotel in a part of Seoul.

Astina looked up at the building, her mouth agape in awe.

"Let's go in."

"Y-Yeah, okay."

She followed with an air of bewilderment, sticking close behind me, occasionally glancing around.

She clung to my coat with a timid grip.

It was a side of Astina I hadn't seen before, and I couldn't help but smile.

But I could empathize; I'd probably act the same way if I were suddenly dropped into an unfamiliar world.

"Ah! Is that my son arriving?"

As we entered the wedding hall, a cheerful middle-aged man greeted us.

Astina, hearing his words, widened her eyes in surprise.

"Ru-Rudy? Son?"

Her face showed evident confusion.

Seeing her reaction, I smiled and replied,

"It's been a while, father."

Astina immediately tugged on my sleeve, seeking an explanation.

Astina tiptoed closer to whisper into my ear.

"Rudy, that's your father?"

"He's my elder uncle."

Hearing my response, Astina heaved a sigh.

"Once everything is over, you better explain everything to me."

Until now, Astina had always shown me great consideration.

Whenever I asked her to do something, she never questioned the reasons behind it.

She would proceed without asking, always hinting that she wanted answers someday.

But now, it seemed she wouldn't step back any longer.

She looked at me, expecting a full explanation.

"Understood."

I replied, nodding at Astina.

She had risked her life coming here.

It didn't make sense to keep her in the dark any longer.

I had delayed for too long, but I intended to tell her everything now.

"My boy! Do you think it's acceptable to be late for your sister's wedding?"

Boomed my elder uncle, approaching with a hearty laugh.

A middle-aged man with a muscular build, that's how I remembered my elder uncle.

Even when I made mistakes, he would forgive and cherish me, always treating me warmly with a touch of playfulness.

I barely remember my real parents since they passed away when I was young.

I never really missed them.

But I always felt apologetic towards my elder uncle.

He had always cared for me, and in the end, I could only show him my broken self.

The regrets and feelings of guilt welled up within me, but for now, I faced the present.

I wanted to let go of these regrets and move forward.

Smiling at my elder uncle, I said,

"I apologize, Uncle. I drank a bit too much last night."

His eyes widened in surprise.

"What? Our little bookworm had too much to drink and came late?"

He laughed heartily,

"Well, if that's the case, can't help it then! Hahaha!"

Watching him laugh so genuinely, I too broke into a smile.

As his laughter subsided, he squinted towards something—or someone—behind me.

"But… who is she?"

He asked cautiously, seemingly referring to Astina.

Stepping forward slightly, Astina introduced herself,

"Greetings. My name is Astina."

Astina greeted my uncle with respect.

"Um…"

He switched his gaze between Astina and me.

From his perspective, he had never seen me with someone else.

I didn't have many friends.

Because for me, studying had always been my only companion.

I felt I knew what my uncle was thinking.

After all, I had suddenly brought a girl, so what else could it be?

And I wanted to live up to that expectation.

"Yes, she's my girlfriend."

“…What?"

"Wait… What did you just say?"

Astina's eyes widened in shock, and my uncle stepped back, clearly flustered.

"Hey, what… what does that mean…?"

Astina stammered, looking at me.

I smiled at her reaction.

"I'm sorry. Can you please play along?"

Even though it was just a dream, I wanted to show my uncle my best side.

I wanted to present the successful version of myself that he had always hoped for.

Saying that, I took Astina's hand.

And I held it out as if to showcase it to my uncle.

"She's beautiful, isn’t she? My girlfriend."

My uncle stared at me with his mouth agape.

For a moment, he was speechless.

But soon, a proud smile formed on his lips.

"Yes, she truly is beautiful."

I continued,

"And now I have many friends, and have some skills to boast of as well."

"Did you get your test results back?"

At my uncle's question, I couldn't help but smile.

"It's not about that."

Right now, I wanted to express my true feelings, my resolve.

The reason I couldn’t leave this place.

To be honest, I wanted to return to my world.

I was scared.

In the new world I found myself in, everyone around me was in danger, and my life was always on the line.

That world terrified me.

That's why I depended on the future I knew.

Even though I realized that future had changed, I still clung to it.

I wanted to depend on the story I knew.

Because it was a story where everyone found happiness.

A story where I didn't have to take action.

In my own way, I was avoiding reality.

But now, I've made up my mind.

I've decided to venture onto a new path.

To carve out my own path.

"To be honest, I don’t know what the future holds, but I'll give it my all. Everything I've got."

My uncle looked deep into my eyes.

Then he smiled.

He spoke,

"I've always believed in you."

It was something he always said, whether I was going to college without money, preparing for law school, or when I felt down.

He always supported me.

I know this isn't reality; it's a dream.

But hearing my uncle’s voice, I wanted to hear him say those words.

I looked at my uncle and smiled.

"Just watch me."

On the rooftop of the hotel.

After the wedding of my cousin, Astina and I had walked up to the rooftop.

Astina stared intently at me.

"So, where are we?"

Instead of answering her question, I replied,

"I am not Rudy Astria."

Hearing this, Astina's face hardened with surprise.

"Then, who are you?"

"Just an ordinary person borrowing his body."

"Since when?"

"Since the entrance ceremony."

Astina seemed to relax a bit at my response, gracing me with her signature warm smile.

"So when I first met you, it was actually you,"

She mused.

"Yeah…"

She lightly tapped my chest,

"Then, to me, you are Rudy Astria. At least, I and those around me never knew the Rudy Astria before."

A smile formed on my face,

"Thank you for saying that."

"Why? You merely stated who you are."

She shrugged,

"So, where are we?"

"This is a place called Korea. It's probably a city that doesn't exist in your world."

I then proceeded to explain how I became Rudy Astria, delving briefly but in detail about her world being from a game.

"So… our world is a game? You've seen our future?"

While it was challenging to fully explain the concept of a game to Astina, she seemed to grasp the idea to an extent.

"However, that future has already been disrupted. Things are progressing very differently."

"Hmm…"

Astina touched her cheek, lost in thought.

After a moment, she looked up sharply.

"I might know about this…”

"What?"

My eyes widened.

"I can't be sure just yet, but I'll look into it."

How could she know about this?

I was about to ask her another question when a portal-like void appeared next to us.

Astina gestured toward the black void,

"To figure this out, we'd need to go back, right?"

She flashed a reassuring smile.

CHAPTER 122
HANDLING THE REMNANTS (1)

"So, it's time for me to go now?"

Jefrin said, a smile on her face as she looked at Luna.

Astina and Rudy lay asleep on the ground, with Luna seated next to them.

"Yes."

Hearing Luna's reply, Jefrin pondered the terms of the contract she had with Astina:

Neither Astina herself nor Jefrin can engage in combat in this place.

Once Astina falls asleep, Jefrin must leave this place immediately.

By 'place,' it refers to inside the castle.

However, there was a loophole in this contract.

Technically, after leaving 'this place', they could engage in combat outside the castle.

While this seemed like mere wordplay, contracts often hinge on specific phrasing.

That's why it's crucial to specify terms to prevent such manipulation.

'You shouldn't make agreements hastily.'

Astina had quickly entered Rudy's dream.

Considering that, she might have missed this loophole.

"Well, take care then."

Jefrin said to Luna, then discreetly made her way out of the castle.

Luna watched her intently until she was out of sight.

Once she had disappeared to a certain extent, she opened her magic book.

"This must be what Astina mentioned…”

Recalling Astina's words:

If we don't wake up within 2 hours, inform those nearby.

Yet, Luna felt that there was a deeper intention behind those words.

If Astina had meant just that, she would have discreetly relayed it to Luna, ensuring Jefrin didn't overhear.

Additionally, Luna had watched the agreement Astina made.

But something felt off.

The usually meticulous Astina was somewhat careless in finalizing the contract.

At that moment, Astina had given Luna a meaningful look, seemingly suggesting she should pay close attention to the contract's details.

"This must be it…”

Luna activated a magic circle from the book.

The book emanated light, and a small flame rose from it.

The flame shot up into the sky.

Bang!

It burst like a firework, pointing in the direction Jefrin had gone.

It was a faint flare, hardly noticeable unless one was looking for it.

After setting off the flare, Luna clasped her hands together.

"Ugh…”

Suddenly, a soft noise came from the side.

"Huh?"

Although Astina had just fallen asleep, Rudy began to stir.

Luna rushed to his side, asking,

"Rudy, are you alright?"

Rudy, clutching his head as if in pain, furrowed his brow.

Then he spoke,

"Luna…”

Glancing around and seeing Astina still asleep, he said,

"Seems I'm back."

Luna, observing Rudy's state, let out a sigh of relief.

"Thank goodness…”

Luna couldn't help but worry.

In the end, both of them could have been in a situation where they could die.

Even though Astina had stepped in, the uneasiness didn't completely dissipate.

Still, seeing Rudy in good health brought a smile to her face.

Rudy glanced around.

"How much time has passed?"

"Not much, I think. Probably less than 10 minutes."

“…Does time flow differently in dreams and reality?"

Rudy picked himself up from the ground.

"If it hasn't been long, then that guy hasn't been gone for too long either, right?"

"Huh?"

Luna tilted her head in confusion.

"We can't let her escape. After all, we've captured a rebel."

The conversation Astina and Rudy had before waking from the dream went as follows:

-Rudy, once we're outside, we can't be certain about how much time has passed or who will wake up first, but we must capture that rebel immediately upon waking.

Jefrin.

When Luna first heard the name Jefrin, she reacted as if it sounded familiar.

And there was a reason for that.

-That guy is a renowned wizard for illusion magic. The Eternal Sleep spell, which you experienced, was a widely-discussed spell in research papers.

-We can't let her slip away. She's a big deal.

Rudy stretched his body and got to his feet.

"Which way did that guy go?"

Jefrin swiftly utilized her body enhancement magic to escape the area.

‘If I can just get a little further and meet ‘him’…’

The rebels hadn't stationed all their forces within the castle.

They had dispersed troops outside the castle.

These weren't the ones planning to fight directly but were reserves, waiting to intervene if the situation got messy.

Above all else, with 'his' magic, they could assuredly turn the tides of battle.

Because in this war, 'he' was even more skilled than Jefrin.

As Jefrin was rushing out, the sky seemed wrong.

A rumbling resounded.

"What's going on? Why's the weather suddenly…"

Dark clouds began to move ominously.

Though it had been clear, the surrounding clouds turned a dark shade, especially close to where Jefrin was.

Sparks then began to erupt from these clouds.

The sparks congregated and struck the ground.

"What the…!"

Caught off guard, Jefrin reflexively dove to the side without even thinking to use a protective spell.

"Ah…!"

BOOM!

A bolt of lightning crashed down.

As befitting its reputation as a heavenly flame, it incinerated its surroundings.

The ground where the lightning had struck was scorched black, with faint currents still evident nearby.

Jefrin stared, wide-eyed, at the charred earth.

She quickly surmised this was no coincidence.

Where on earth was this coming from?

Jefrin struggled to determine if this was a result of magic, elemental usage, or some other technique.

An unseen assailant.

A one-sided attack.

She grunted in frustration.

How did they know to target her?

She had made a swift exit right after encountering Astina.

Considering the ambush from those kids earlier, it felt as though they were well-aware of the rebels' plans.

Logically, skilled individuals would be stationed at critical locations, especially with the need to fend off magical beasts.

They surely couldn’t afford to divert any extra hands.

‘How did they know I was fleeing?’

Focused in her escape, Jefrin failed to notice the spell Luna had shot into the sky.

The surrounding noises of battle with the magical beasts and soldiers' shouts drowned out the sound of the spell.

Even for an experienced wizard like Jefrin, the situation made it hard for her to think clearly.

“For now… I need to escape quickly…”

BOOM!

“Kieek!”

Another lightning bolt struck right in front of Jefrin's path.

Had she acted a split second sooner, she would've been caught in it.

In her current state, she couldn't defend against such powerful magic.

It seemed even stronger than the magic wielded by Astina.

"I need to hide."

Rather than fleeing, Jefrin decided to conceal herself first.

"What is this…?"

The arrogant demeanor Jefrin had displayed in front of Rudy's group earlier was nowhere to be found.

Only fear remained.

She hid beneath a massive rock.

Given the vast, barren landscape typical of the northern region, the only available cover was scattered boulders.

"Mist of Illusion!"

Jefrin invoked her spell.

Almost immediately, the surroundings grew hazy, as if engulfed by a thick fog.

Hidden behind a stone, she shrank back.

The Mist of Illusion spell spread a mist, filled with mana, which rendered the caster undetectable.

It was clear someone was targeting her from a distance without revealing themselves.

Being targeted from afar meant someone was using a detection spell to pinpoint her location.

So she decided to hide using the Mist of Illusion and wait for a moment.

BOOM!

CRACKLE!

Ugh…

The sound of continuous lightning strikes echoed nearby.

Fortunately, the lightning, which had seemed so accurately aimed at her, appeared to strike randomly.

She waited for a few moments.

"Is it over now?"

The onslaught stopped.

"They couldn't possibly spam such a powerful spell indefinitely. Heh…"

Though Jefrin managed a smirk, her legs trembled uncontrollably.

Using the boulder for support, she staggered to her feet.

"I should flee for now…"

Thud, thud.

Footsteps approached Jefrin from the side.

"What…?"

Due to the Mist of Illusion, the fog made it challenging to identify the approaching figure.

"Who… who are you?"

She yelled in the direction of the sound.

The rebels were rumored to be lurking outside the castle.

Given the persistent lightning and the thick fog, she figured they might have noticed the anomalies and sent someone to investigate.

Straining her eyes, Jefrin tried to get a clearer look.

Thud.

The footsteps stopped momentarily.

Thud, thud, thud…

The pace quickened.

Thud, thud, thud, thud, thud, thud!

Suddenly, the person broke into a sprint, charging right at her.

"Huh?"

And then the figure came into Jefrin's sight.

"You're too late."

It was Rudy Astria.

"How… how did you…?"

Jefrin was speechless.

Even if Astina had entered that dream, she couldn't fathom how they'd managed to emerge from it so quickly.

And then Rudy swung his fist.

"Whoomp!"

Jefrin swiftly dodged to the side.

Rushing in, Rudy's punch squarely hit the rock where Jefrin had been hiding.

It was a massive rock.

A rock more than five times the size of a human.

Crack…!

However, the rock began to fissure upon taking Rudy's blow.

A rock of that monumental size, shattered by a wizard's punch…

Boom!!!!!!!!

And then, the rock crumbled to pieces.

"Ah…"

Bits of the destroyed rock fell around Jefrin.

Rudy, staring intently at the shattered rock, turned his gaze towards Jefrin.

And then he spoke.

"Found you."

CHAPTER 123
HANDLING THE REMNANTS (2)

I looked down at Jefrin, who was sprawled on the ground.

With a mischievous grin, I teased,

"Come on, young one. Follow me if you don't want to die."

"Y-young one?"

Jefrin scowled at me, her anger evident.

In our first encounter, she had always referred to us with that belittling term.

It always seemed as though she was flaunting her age, as if it were some kind of trophy.

Despite looking like a young girl, according to Astina, she was an aged wizard.

So, I figured that such provocation would be quite effective.

“You still haven't learned your lesson, young one?”

Just as I had anticipated, Jefrin retorted with a face flushed in fury, trying to lift herself off the ground.

“Finger of the Demon.”

Without missing a beat, I unleashed a spell upon her.

Dark columns erupted from the ground beneath her.

“Ah…”

Jefrin quickly tried to dodge, but due to her vulnerable position, her cheek was

grazed by the razor-sharp pillar.

Smiling confidently, I approached the wounded Jefrin,

"Ready for another round?"

By now, I had a fairly clear understanding of her abilities.

She excelled at illusion magic, had a knack for defensive spells, but her offensive capabilities were somewhat lacking.

And those who relied on illusion magic often tried to mislead their adversaries, catching them off-guard.

But the drawback was, once they revealed themselves, they became significantly weaker than other wizards.

Given that I could discern whether her magic was an illusion or not, it made countering her moves relatively simple.

It was clear that taking on Jefrin now would be much easier compared to our before.

“Ugh… Blind Fog!”

At her command, a black smoke-like mist rapidly spread around us.

It had the semblance of smoke but felt eerily different.

“An illusion?”

Just a visual distraction, a subset of her illusion magic.

“Behemoth.”

With my command, the ground rumbled and split open, revealing the Behemoth, a creature resembling a baby elephant in size.

Jefrin’s scream echoed as the illusionary fog dissipated almost instantly.

I could see him stumbling and falling, probably tripped by the split earth.

The illusion, fragile to even the slightest disruption, must've faded when she tripped.

“Punch of Ruin!”

I slammed my fist into the ground, causing a much more significant quake than when the Behemoth had appeared.

The ground around the spot where I struck shattered, scattering rocks and debris everywhere.

The spot I stood on had sunk, while the surroundings rose in jagged protrusions.

“Agh!!!”

A scream echoed from behind me.

The previously visible figure of Jefrin, who had been lying ahead, started to blur and fade away.

As I looked in the direction of the scream, I saw Jefrin, dagger in hand, stumbling and rolling on the ground.

"It's obvious now."

I had roughly figured out Jefrin's personality by now.

Given my earlier taunt calling him a child, there was no way she'd simply flee.

"Behemoth, bind him."

"Pwoooh!"

Upon my command, the scattered rocks around us moved, converging toward Jefrin.

Jefrin, seemingly unwilling to be captured so easily, furrowed her brows and began channeling her mana.

“Invisible Exit!”

With a sharp 'bang', she invoked her magic, her figure disappearing as if concealed

by an unseen force.

The rocks that had been heading for Jefrin collided with each other and fell back to the ground.

“Didn’t I tell you it wouldn’t work?”

I smirked.

Reaching into my pocket, I pulled out a mana stone.

A dark magic spell I had been practicing, using a sacrifice.

My mana began to swirl, enveloping the mana stone.

“Haaa…”

I felt my mana start to absorb the stone, drawing in its energy.

Closing my eyes, I deeply felt the presence of the stone, absorbing all its power.

Mana pulsated within my hand, gathering with intensity.

Channeling it, I mixed it with my inner reserves.

With this combined power, I cast my spell.

Black flames, originating from me, spread outward in all directions.

It resembled a hazy, smoke-like fire.

These black flames advanced, casting a shadowy blaze across the ground.

“What… is that…?”

Jefrin seemed baffled by the situation.

No matter how skilled a wizard she might be, it appeared she wasn’t well-versed in dark magic.

Panicking, Jefrin tried to escape the encroaching flames, running desperately.

I just stood there, watching her, confident.

She was bound to be ensnared, not by me, but by the flames.

The flames, which had been spreading evenly before, now seemed to chase after Jefrin specifically.

It was as if a shadow was hungrily stalking its prey, stretching across the ground.

The flames sped up, soon outpacing Jefrin's frantic escape.

Realizing the imminent threat, Jefrin stretched out her hand toward the flames and shouted.

“Barrier!”

An attempt at a defensive spell by Jefrin.

It seemed strong.

However, this magic was unstoppable.

Jefrin had already consumed a lot of mana and had been rolling around, sustaining injuries.

And so…

The flames following Jefrin enveloped the barrier in a circular fashion.

I stared intently at the scene and raised my hand.

"Ah."

Suddenly, something occurred to me.

"Thanks for the dream? It was a pleasant one."

Upon hearing this, a fierce anger flashed in Jefrin's eyes.

"You son of—"

Before Jefrin could curse, I clenched my fist.

Boom!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

The flames that had surrounded the barrier soared upwards.

Hellfire.

A spell that pursues its designated target and detonates upon impact.

A magic that could be invoked by offering a mana stone as a sacrifice.

Given that this dark magic required the sacrifice of a mana stone, its destructive power was different from ordinary spells.

The black flames rising from Jefrin's direction seemed to touch the sky.

After a while, the flames began to settle.

"Phew……."

Once the flames had vanished, I looked below.

Jefrin was lying there, charred and motionless.

"Is she still breathing?"

Noticing Jefrin's back moving up and down, it seemed like she was alive.

"It's better if she survived."

If she's alive, it means we can extract information about the rebels from her.

I slowly approached Jefrin.

"Roarrrr!!!"

At that moment, Behemoth let out a roar from below.

It's strange to describe it as a roar, but it certainly made a loud sound.

“…What's the matter?"

"Roarrrr!!"

Behemoth stomped its feet, seemingly protesting, and let out a sound.

Narrowing my eyes, I looked at Behemoth,

"What are you trying to say……”

Tilting my head, wondering if it wanted me to listen, I picked up Behemoth into my embrace.

Despite resembling an elephant, its size was like a small dog, fitting snugly in my arms.

"Roar!"

Behemoth then patted my chest with its foot.

"Not this either?"

What does it want…

Then, Behemoth, looking frustrated, pointed its trunk toward a certain direction.

"Over there? Why?"

It pointed to the sky.

"Ah?"

Above the sky.

Something was there.

It was hard to see, but looking at it…

"Bones…?"

Bones of something were descending from the sky.

This felt unusual.

"What's…"

The bones were getting closer.

And they weren't just any ordinary bones.

"Why is it so big…"

I took a step back.

It kept approaching.

As it came closer, I could make out what it was.

"A… dragon?"

A dragon made of bones.

It was a Bone Dragon.

Riding on its back was a figure.

The Bone Dragon approached closer and closer to me.

A gust of wind swept forth.

I raised my arm to shield against the gust.

Thud!

The Bone Dragon landed right before me.

Its immense size felt even more overwhelming up close.

Its body was larger than most houses.

Standing before it, I felt an intense pressure.

This pressure pressed down on me, even though the Bone Dragon wasn't doing anything in particular.

It was the fear of its mere presence.

With heightened alertness, I glared at the Bone Dragon.

Then, from atop its back, a man leaped down.

He wore a robe and had dark circles under his eyes and unkempt hair.

Using magic, he landed safely on the ground.

Without even sparing me a glance, he walked toward Jefrin.

I was torn.

Should I stop this man?

But considering this Bone Dragon…

In the brief moment, I doubted if I could defeat the dragon or its wizard rider.

Would it be wise to just stand still since they're ignoring me?

The man, now picking up Jefrin, began to walk back to the Bone Dragon.

As he casually proceeded, he suddenly turned her head to look straight at me.

Then he spoke.

"The Leader has taken an interest in you."

“…What?"

My eyes widened in shock.

Suddenly, the Rebel Leader is interested in me?

But wasn't the Leader gravely injured…?

"Now is not the time. Later, I'll come with the Leader to see you."

"What do you mean by that?"

He ignored my questions and began to mount the Bone Dragon.

I have to stop him and get some answers!

"Finger of the Demon!"

Upon my spell's incantation, black pillars sprouted from the ground, aiming to stop the Bone Dragon.

The man atop the Bone Dragon voiced the same spell.

"Finger of the Demon."

Crash!

Identical pillars to mine emerged, colliding with my own.

Dark magic.

I scowled.

"If you cast another spell, I won't stand by idly."

He warned.

Heeding his words, I refrained from making another move.

He was stronger than me.

But not just strong; he wielded the same magic as me.

There was no way for me to gain an upper hand.

No advantages in attribute differences or using lesser-known aspects of dark magic.

"Sigh…"

With a heavy sigh, I continued to watch the Bone Dragon.

Powerless, all I could do was witness the unfolding scene.

The man, astride the bone dragon, glanced my way before giving the creature's head a gentle tap.

At his gesture, the bone dragon began to flap its wings.

"Ah…"

The forceful gust of wind made me squint.

And then, the bone dragon ascended into the sky, gradually disappearing from sight.

I gazed after it, murmuring to myself,

“Why is the leader interested in me?”

Why indeed?

CHAPTER 124
HANDLING THE REMNANTS (3)

In a rush, a man raced through the forest.

"What the hell is happening?"

Cedric was sprinting with a pressing need to reach the castle.

Though he believed he had a purpose, in truth, he was fleeing.

He knew he stood no chance against Gracie and thought it better to rally and fight at the castle.

As Cedric dashed on, the mercenaries who had gathered around him scattered in all directions.

These soldiers were just a group brought together by their trust in Cedric.

But seeing Cedric unable to confront Gracie and instead fleeing, they lost their anchor, becoming disorganized.

Many of the mercenaries fell to Gracie's lightning magic.

Those who managed to withstand it saw Cedric running away and began to flee as well.

Within moments, Cedric found himself bereft of his mercenary force.

He decided his best course of action was to make his way to the castle.

'I must reach the castle… Start the rebellion.'

Cedric thought, although deep down, a part of him contemplated fleeing entirely.

He knew he couldn't handle Gracie.

Despite his title as the Mercenary King, Cedric was still just a mercenary, unable to match a prized talent of the empire.

"Damn it…"

Grimacing, Cedric swiftly left the scene, with Gracie and Locke on his tail.

Time passed as he continued his escape, and he began to feel something was wrong.

"Why isn't she using her lightning anymore?"

He recalled the continuous electric attacks she had launched as they pursued him.

He had taken several hits, but his robust physique allowed him to endure the shocks and continue his escape.

However, the magic assaults had stopped, though he was sure they hadn't lost track of him.

He could still see Locke pursuing him in the distance.

Cedric made a realization.

"Has she exhausted her mana?"

This could be his chance.

Decisively, he headed for the castle.

There, he knew he'd have the backing of the rebels and the soldiers that might betray their posts.

Even if the wizard was formidable, he was certain that he would have the upper hand once inside the castle.

Suddenly, a loud alert resonated through the air, sounding like a warning siren.

Immediately after…

BOOM!

A massive explosion echoed, coming from the direction of the main gate – where the monsters were attacking.

The warning he had just heard was undoubtedly the one the rebels had spoken of – a signal from the magical device on the castle walls, indicating it was about to detonate.

Cedric's previously tense face lightened up a bit.

"Did… did it work?"

Hope welled up in Cedric.

All he needed to do now was get to the castle.

With renewed vigor, Cedric increased his pace.

As he ran, a light appeared before him, signifying that he was nearing the edge of the forest.

Following the guiding light, a castle came into view.

Cedric ran with all his might.

He sprinted tirelessly until he emerged from the forest, and before him stood the grand castle.

Cedric was about to rush towards it when suddenly, he froze in his tracks.

Emerging from the forest, not only was the castle in sight, but there stood a man in black armor.

The distinctive black armor. An armor unique in all the world.

It was the very same worn by his once close friend, Darren, when facing monsters.

"How… is this possible?"

Cedric stammered, staring at the figure in disbelief.

The soft clinking of the armor's joints echoed subtly in the air.

Darren slowly lifted his head, locking eyes with Cedric.

"It's been a while, Cedric."

Cedric stumbled back, caught off guard.

He hadn't expected a face-to-face confrontation.

His plan had been simple: to ambush Darren while he was distracted fighting the monsters, swiftly and without exchange.

But standing here, face to face, he felt utterly disarmed.

"I was sure of it… the magical device had been activated."

Cedric murmured.

Darren replied in a calm, measured tone,

"You mean this? I had instructed it to be used against the monsters."

Before Cedric's arrival, almost all the monsters had been dealt with.

As the cleanup was nearing completion, Darren handed the device to a trusted lieutenant.

He had given clear instructions: detonate it amidst the monsters when the time was right.

"Given the explosion I heard, it seems it served its purpose well."

Having the device detonated when the situation was almost resolved surely sent shivers down the spines of any soldiers plotting betrayal.

The explosion wasn't from the castle walls collapsing but from dealing the finishing blow to the monsters.

"Now, only you remain."

Darren unsheathed his sword,

"Why did you resort to this? You of all people should know better…"

Cedric gritted his teeth, drawing his own blade,

"What would you know?"

He spat, voice filled with anger and resentment.

"Do you have any idea what I've endured? What I've been through?"

"I've saved subjects from their lords, freed slaves, tried to make the world a better place. But nothing ever changes. You wouldn't understand, sequestered up north. What could you possibly know?"

"I've seen the world, Darren. A world far uglier than you could ever imagine."

Listening to Cedric's passionate outburst, Darren finally spoke,

"Is that all you have to say?"

"What?"

"Is your rant over?"

Cedric's eyes blazed with fury.

"After hearing all that, you feel nothing?!"

Darren looked at Cedric with a mix of pity and disappointment.

"So, are you implying that my territory and I have done something wrong?"

"Ah…"

The North was blameless.

Despite facing a constant onslaught of monsters and barren conditions, its inhabitants supported each other, striving to make their territory as prosperous as possible.

They were innocent.

"However… for a greater cause… for freedom… this land must…"

"Don't spout such nonsense."

Darren stepped forward.

"I might not understand what you seek, but don't impose it on those who are living good lives. Every territory has its problems. If something is lacking now, start with the small changes. There's no need to endure significant sacrifices without reason."

There was no guarantee that such sacrifices would bring about a better outcome.

Cedric shouted back,

"What do you know…!"

Darren replied,

"The world is already changing, shifting from our old generation to the budding new one."

Darren smiled.

"I'll trust and wait for those young ones. I believe they will grow like great trees and change the world."

He then took a stand in front of Cedric.

"To let a good tree grow, you should at least weed out its surroundings."

Assuming a ready stance with his sword, Darren fixed his gaze on Cedric.

In response, Cedric too unsheathed his blade.

From their blades, an intense aura surged.

Darren slightly lifted his head.

At the edge of his sight stood Locke, who had followed Cedric.

Locke, waiting at the forest's entrance.

Darren called out to him,

"Locke, watch closely. This is the swordsmanship of the North."

Locke intently observed.

The way his own father wielded his sword…

"The Sword of the North…"

The Sword of the North – cold, resolute.

A blue aura circled around the sword.

Blue Flame.

The hue of the aura depends on the nature of one's mana and their swordsmanship training.

The distinctive feature of the sword aura from Northern families was this blue color.

However, this blue aura was intense.

The Northern swordsmanship, known for its disciplined and precise movements, was often likened to ice.

Yet, the energy it exuded was fiery.

It was an icy technique with a contrasting fiery aura.

Darren swung his sword horizontally.

His unwavering blade seemed to mirror his disposition, moving straight and true.

"Blue Blossom."

His blade drew a simple line in the air.

However, the energy slicing the surroundings was different.

A vast blue aura, sharp and incisive, lunged at Cedric, almost like a wave.

Cedric, releasing his own energy, attempted to parry the incoming wave.

His energy wasn't weak.

But it paled in comparison to Darren's.

"What…?"

Cedric stared intently at Darren's sword.

He had seen Darren wield his sword many times, but he had never witnessed such a powerful sword aura.

In all their battles, Darren had never unleashed an aura of this magnitude.

KWAAAAAAAA!!!

Darren's sword aura swept across the surroundings, hurtling towards Cedric.

Blue flames scorched the ground as they raced by.

The ground was stained with the blue hue from the flames.

It looked almost like a meadow adorned with blue flowers.

"Ha…"

Seeing this, Cedric lowered his sword.

He realized that this wasn't a sword aura he could parry.

Darren's blue inferno engulfed Cedric, and all he could see was a world dyed in blue.

“Is it over?”

After waking from her dream, Astina used her telekinetic magic to soar into the sky.

The academy's main entrance lay below, littered with the corpses of numerous magical beasts.

The back entrance was blanketed with blue flames.

And there was Rudy, slowly walking in from outside the academy grounds.

Everything seemed to have been handled well.

“What a relief…”

Her only regret was that they had failed to capture Jefrin.

When Astina took to the sky, she spotted the silhouette of a distant dragon vanishing.

But pursuing it was out of the question.

Heading in that direction would mean storming the enemy's headquarters.

She couldn't infiltrate the heart of the rebels alone.

“Ugh… What is this?”

There was someone trembling with fear in Astina's embrace.

It was Luna.

Luna clung to Astina like a damsel, holding onto her neck tightly and burying her face in Astina's bosom.

“Ah, Astina… aren’t you scared?”

Luna asked with a quivering voice.

“At first, I was a bit scared too, but as things went on, I got used to it.”

Astina said with a playful smile, looking at the petrified Luna.

“Shall we go to Rudy then?”

“Wha- What? Can’t we just… land?"

Luna, despite her fondness for Rudy, resisted the idea of flying towards him.

But Astina, paying no heed to Luna's protests, flew straight to Rudy.

At an astonishingly rapid speed.

"KYAAAAAAAAA!!!"

Luna screamed at the top of her lungs.

Her scream echoed throughout the fortress.

With that scream marking its end, the battle of the North came to a close.

CHAPTER 125
RIE VON RISTONIA (1)

"Alright, the Midterm Camp will now come to a close."

Rie's voice echoed throughout the mountains where the camp was being held.

The previous camp had been thrown into chaos by an invasion from the Rebels, but this time it ended without any major incidents.

Relief washed over the faces of the tense faculty members.

During the last camp, the academy had to issue a mass apology to the students.

Even Principal McDowell had personally come to protect them.

It had been a deeply embarrassing situation for the academy.

So, this time they prioritized student safety and made extensive preparations.

They thoroughly scouted the surrounding areas, sealed potential hideouts in the forest with magic, and positioned teaching assistants nearby to prevent any unforeseen incidents.

Even with all these preparations, nothing out of the ordinary happened.

But that wasn't necessarily odd.

The previous camp was the anomaly; a camp typically concluding without incidents was the norm.

Their preventative measures might seem like an unnecessary effort in hindsight.

However, when it came to ensuring the safety of students, no effort was considered too much.

The faculty might feel their efforts were wasted, but they were just grateful everything concluded peacefully, and their faces broke into smiles.

"Professor, thank you for your hard work."

"Not at all. Professor Mcguire, you've worked even harder."

With that, the professors exchanged cheerful greetings.

While most were exchanging pleasantries, one person seemed notably displeased.

"What's wrong?"

That person was Rie.

Yuni looked quizzically at her, tilting her head.

In truth, Rie had been looking distressed for some time now.

It probably started around the time Rudy Astria departed for the North.

Yuni, who had been assisting her sister, was well aware of this change.

However, she didn't understand the reason behind Rie's demeanor.

Initially, Yuni assumed that preparing for the Midterm Camp was wearing on Rie, but seeing her like this for so long made it clear something else was going on.

Tap, tap, tap.

Despite the camp's conclusion, Rie sat at her desk, drumming her fingers on its surface.

Yuni observed her sister's peculiar behavior.

"Aren't you going to rest, sis?"

Rie briefly looked at Yuni, sighed, and responded,

"I should rest."

She then attempted to rise from her seat to leave.

Tripping over her own feet, Rie stumbled.

With a thud, she found herself sprawled on the floor.

"…"

Such a move was uncharacteristic for the usually graceful Rie.

"What are you doing…?"

Yuni began, taken aback.

Rie hastily picked herself up, dusted off her attire, and commented, trying to play off her stumble,

"I'm going to take a break. If there's anything, just call me."

Her attempt to act nonchalant failed as her cheeks flushed with evident embarrassment.

Yuni stared intently at Rie, who was now quickly heading out.

"Why is she acting like this?"

Night at the Liberion Academy.

Within the buildings of Liberion Academy, freshmen were laughing and chatting while enjoying a feast.

Rie thought back to her own memories of the midterm camp.

The moment she held hands with Rudy and they ran away together.

Despite the life-threatening situation, he never let go of her hand.

When she could no longer run, he carried her on his back.

The memories brought a smile to her lips.

Shaking off the memories, Rie walked towards the entrance of the academy, then looked up at the sky.

The night had enveloped the surroundings, turning the sky pitch black.

"Is everything coming to an end now?"

She thought of Rudy.

It had been nearly two weeks since she last saw his face.

To Rie, these two weeks felt longer than two months.

When something new comes into one's life, one adapts quickly.

But when something familiar disappears, the void feels incredibly large.

Rie had hoped she would get used to it.

Yet, she couldn't.

His image kept flooding back to her.

Sometimes he appeared in her dreams; sometimes, she found herself unknowingly murmuring his name.

The past few days were especially hard.

She often found herself staring out of the window, lost in thought, feeling listless.

This was unlike Rie, who was usually meticulous and focused.

She was very aware of her own state, which only deepened her frustration.

Rie had always prided herself on being rational and calm under any circumstance. But now…

"Ugh!"

She lightly slapped her cheeks.

"Why am I like this?"

She wandered slowly in front of the academy building, deep in thought.

Deep down, Rie already knew the reason for her unrest.

"Yes, I… I like…"

She paused, unable to utter the full sentiment.

Her fists clenched tight, and her cheeks turned a shade of deep red.

"Never!"

She couldn't voice her emotions out loud.

Her pride wouldn't allow it.

Admitting her feelings first would feel like defeat.

Yet, she didn't want to give up on Rudy either.

There was only one solution.

'Make Rudy confess first.'

Make him so infatuated that he wouldn't know what to do without her.

So much so that he'd have no choice but to confess…

However, there was a problem.

How was she to do that?

Rie had never been in love before, let alone tried to make someone fall in love with her.

She used to believe that such emotions were nothing but fictional constructs from

novels.

But now, faced with these genuine feelings, she was utterly confused.

She didn't know who to ask for advice, and the very idea of discussing this with someone else made her cringe.

Rie looked up at the academy building, feeling defeated.

"What should I do?"

“Aaargh…”

Inside the carriage, a woman screamed in distress.

It was Professor Gracie.

Luna and I, along with Professor Gracie, were traveling together by carriage.

But why was Professor Gracie making such a noise?

It was because of the alcohol.

After holding back the monsters in the North, the people were in high spirits and held a festival.

From the ordinary citizens of the territory to the reinforcements from the central region, almost everyone was celebrating.

Except for the lord and Locke who had post-battle responsibilities, everyone was drowning in merriment.

“Are you alright…?”

Among them, of course, was Professor Gracie.

Professor Gracie had made quite a name for herself in this battle.

She had fended off Cedric, the Mercenary King, and from a distance had taken shots at Jefrin.

However, an even bigger topic of discussion was the fact that Luna, Astina, and I, all students of the academy, had actively participated in the battle.

While others were dealing with monsters, academy students were confronting the rebels.

This surprising fact was spreading like wildfire.

As a result, the fame of the academy soared.

The talk of the town was that the academy was producing extraordinary talents.

And the curiosity regarding this topic meant that all eyes were on Professor Gracie.

As we were still underage and couldn't drink, the only person at the banquet talking about the academy and indulging in alcohol was Professor Gracie.

Consequently, she found herself moving from group to group, receiving and downing glass after glass.

And now.

While the others who came from the central region to the north were planning to stay for a few more days, we were on our way back.

The academy had its own schedule, so it was essential for us to return as soon as possible.

As a result, Professor Gracie was suffering from a hangover.

Suddenly, with a jolt, Professor Gracie opened her eyes wide.

In a panicked manner, she began tapping Luna beside her repeatedly.

“Urgh…!”

Taking a deep breath, Professor Gracie made Luna jump with surprise.

“Coachman, sir! Please stop the carriage!"

“Ahaha…”

The carriage stopped, and she rushed out.

Then, a rather direct sound could be heard.

“Blaargh!”

The thumping sounds that followed were of Luna patting Professor Gracie's back.

“Sigh…”

I let out a sigh.

I was feeling a bit out of sorts, returning to the academy after such a long time, but seeing Professor Gracie in this state made all those feelings evaporate.

Still, I wasn't exactly in a bad mood.

The matters in the north seemed well-resolved, and no one was hurt, which was a relief.

However, there was just one thing.

The problem was the last words I heard.

- Later, I'll come with the Leader to see you.

Why is the leader interested in me?

The only thing I can guess is…

"No… It must be because of Rudy Astria."

"Hm?"

While I was muttering to myself, Luna, supporting Professor Gracie, walked towards the carriage.

Seeing me, Luna tilted her head with a puzzled look.

"Rudy, what's going on?"

“…Nothing, it's nothing."

I responded with a smile and shook my head dismissively.

Deciding to think about it later, I climbed back into the carriage.

"Let's head back and rest. Professor Gracie looks exhausted."

Luna, noticing my concern, smiled warmly and nodded in agreement.

After a short while, we approached the academy around lunchtime.

The carriage entered the academy grounds, and I opened the window to take a look outside.

I noticed someone standing near where the carriage was coming to a stop.

I leaned forward a bit to get a clearer view.

"Is that Rie?"

"Oh! Looks like it. She must've come to meet us."

The sight of Rie brought a smile to my face.

I felt sorry for leaving her with all the work, and seeing someone you're used to seeing every day after a few days apart made her presence even more welcoming.

As the carriage came to a stop, we disembarked.

"Ugh… I'll be heading off now."

"Alright…”

Professor Gracie, looking as worn out as a zombie, was the first to leave.

We exchanged awkward smiles, watching her walk away.

Then, our attention shifted to Rie.

"…?"

Something felt off.

Rie, who usually greeted us with a confident smile, seemed hesitant.

I was slightly puzzled but still approached her with a friendly wave.

"Rie, you must've had a tough time while I was gone. How have you been?"

Rie hesitated before replying.

"It's been a while, Rudy…”

…?

"The weather's nice today, isn't it?"

Rie's awkward tone caught me off guard.

I looked at her, slightly bewildered.

CHAPTER 126
RIE VON RISTONIA (2)

Liberion Academy's main building, inside a student laboratory.

I was renting one of the labs, focused on an experiment.

"Senior, is this how it's done?"

Click.

"Damn it… Run!!!"

"Huh?"

The magical tool in Yuni's hand began to glow a fiery red.

"Ouch, it's hot! What's this?"

"Damn it, Yuni! Get out!"

I initially tried to flee the lab alone but quickly turned back to grab Yuni's wrist.

Pulling her along, we rushed out of the laboratory.

Once outside, I swiftly shut the door behind us.

Whirr…

Boom!

An explosion echoed from inside.

"What just happened?"

Sigh…

Yuni and I were conducting dark magic research.

Due to my inability to draw magic circles well, I needed help to create the magical tool.

After all, these tools are based on magic circles.

Initially, I wanted Luna's help.

However, Luna was swamped with her own lab work.

While my work hadn't piled up, since my trip to the North was with Professor Gracie, Luna didn't have the same luxury.

She seemed so overwhelmed that I couldn't bring myself to ask.

Thus, I turned to Yuni for help.

"Hey! What do you think you're doing touching that mana stone? Ugh…"

"You didn't tell me not to touch it."

"When did I not? I said it at least three times."

"Did you? I don't recall."

Yuni shrugged, responding nonchalantly.

I let out a sigh.

Maybe I should've asked someone else.

While I composed the magic circle, Yuni was in charge of drawing it out.

It should've been simple.

But, despite her exceptional drawing skills, she constantly caused mishaps.

Whether it was her inserting something into the magic circle out of curiosity or playfully messing with the mana stone.

These blunders led to continuous accidents.

"Ugh, enough."

Our research was a part of the broader studies conducted within the lab.

A few days ago, after returning from the North, Professor Gracie was utterly furious.

-Even the youngest professor deserves respect!

Yuni and I assumed that she'd calm down eventually and continued with our tasks.

But Professor Gracie didn’t stop there.

Before we knew it, she had stormed off to see Cromwell.

-Vice Principal! I can't take it anymore!

The declaration of Professor Gracie's strike was an unprecedented event at the Academy.

Although Cromwell appeared taken aback by her outburst, he managed to calm her down and made a proposition.

He suggested she take a two-week break.

Considering the fatigue from her northern trip and her accumulated work, this generous offer seemed like an apt compensation.

Upon hearing this, tears of joy streamed down Gracie's face as she repeatedly bowed to Cromwell in gratitude.

She never once considered that it was Cromwell who had put her in that situation in the first place.

Regardless, Gracie went on her well-deserved vacation.

However, there was a problem.

Even if Gracie took a vacation, there was still work left in her laboratory.

And now, I was the one designated to take charge of that work.

"Rudy Astria, if Professor Gracie tells you something, you should handle it."

Professor Cromwell… or rather, now Vice Principal Cromwell, informed me of this.

Upon hearing this, I clenched my teeth in frustration.

She takes a break because she doesn't want to work and leaves the tasks to others?

I couldn't just let that slide.

First, I prepared to handle the lab's tasks.

What's done is done.

I believed it was right to address the work that awaited.

We'd be the ones suffering if everything was left as is until Gracie returned.

Of course, Professor Gracie would face some difficulties as well, but I despised the idea of procrastinating and dealing with it later.

So, the first thing I decided was to increase the lab staff.

I was temporarily in charge now; shouldn't I be able to expand the lab team as I saw fit?

"That's not possible. Absolutely not."

"Come on, Kuhn. If a senior asks for a little help, you should give it."

The people I approached were Kuhn and Emily.

Among them, it was Emily I particularly wanted.

Of course, Emily being a 1st-year student did make me a bit apprehensive.

Still, I didn't expect a huge amount of assistance from her, so I simply asked for her help without dwelling on it too much.

"She’s already been assisting with student council duties in your absence. But…”

"10 gold coins."

“…Excuse me?"

"I'll give you 10 gold coins if you work for two weeks. I can even draft a contract."

This money came from the lab's allocated funds.

Research grants that we could utilize at our discretion.

Once Professor Gracie returned, we couldn't just spend it as we pleased, so I decided to use it generously.

Hearing the mention of 10 gold coins, a spark ignited in Emily's eyes.

"Let’s go now. Should I start with cleaning?"

"Uh… Emily?"

"Kuhn… It’s 10 gold coins! Ten!"

Seeing Emily’s elation made me feel quite pleased as well.

The next thing I did was to determine the kind of research we’d conduct in the lab.

The focus was on the fusion of dark magic tools.

Research to create a staff beneficial for dark magic users.

The ideal staff would incorporate a mana stone that suits both the specific magic and its user.

More precisely, the magic circle inscribed onto that mana stone was crucial.

Each magic type had distinct characteristics, so selecting the right magic circle was essential.

In my case, enhancing my fists with magic, using dark magic, summoning elementals,

and other diverse features meant I needed a staff that complemented all of them.

Thus, I decided.

To pivot Gracie's research towards creating a staff tailored to my needs.

Students typically craft their own staff as they graduate from the academy.

Of course, not everyone does.

Some don't make one simply because they lack the funds.

Crafting a staff perfectly attuned to oneself requires a considerable amount of money, resulting in many without a proper staff of their own.

However, I was determined to craft it myself.

Even though Ian had cut off my funding, I wasn’t one to give up so easily.

The main reason staffs were expensive was not just because of the materials but also because everyone required something different from their staff.

Hence, the magic circle engraved on a staff must be unique to its owner.

It should be a magic circle that suits the owner the best.

To achieve this, one needs to research magic circles, and the cost of such research is no small amount.

I decided to tackle this issue head-on.

My solution was to conduct research related to my staff in Gracie’s lab.

Simple enough.

So, after Gracie went on vacation,

Yuni and I began our research on the relationship between dark magic and staffs.

A field completely different from Gracie's expertise.

But that didn’t matter.

After all, who’s in charge now?

Gracie's vacation was set to last for two weeks.

Typically, getting approval for a research project takes about a week.

So, we'd have everything settled before Gracie returns.

Why did she run off by herself like that?

It's her own doing.

I never wanted things to be this way.

But what can you do?

If you leave a fish store in the care of a cat, you should expect the fish to be gone.

And now, Yuni and I rented a lab to conduct research on magical tools.

"Whew… We should call it a day."

"Yes, that might be best."

I glanced around the lab, which was in chaos because of an accident Yuni had.

Magical tools had exploded, leaving iron fragments everywhere.

Some of the papers on the desk were on fire.

Thankfully, the lab was protected by defensive magic, preventing the explosion from reaching the outside.

"Water Ball."

Using a basic water magic spell, I hurriedly extinguished the flames.

"Let's start by cleaning up."

With the state of the lab, there was no way we'd get any more research done today.

And so, Yuni and I began tidying up the devastated lab.

As we cleaned, I quietly started a conversation.

"Yuni, there's something I've been wanting to ask you."

Honestly, the news of Professor Gracie running off was irritating, but given our situation, it might be a blessing in disguise.

But there was something else bothering me more.

"Did something happen to Rie while I was away?"

Lately, Rie's behavior seemed off.

She kept acting strangely.

It's like… she was doing something… unusual.

"I'm not sure? I didn’t notice anything."

Yuni shrugged.

"If nothing happened, then never mind."

I brushed it off, thinking it might just be my imagination.

Although Rie's behavior was a bit unusual, it wasn’t affecting our work.

Once we tidied up the lab, Yuni and I headed out.

"If we leave the windows open, the burnt smell should be gone by tomorrow."

"Will you be heading to the student council room?"

"I have to. There’s work to be done."

"Alright then. See you tomorrow~."

Waving her hand, Yuni headed in a different direction.

Soon, I arrived at the student council office.

I opened the door and stepped inside.

"Oh, you're here?"

Inside was Rie.

"Where are the others?"

"I'm not sure."

Rie answered my question nonchalantly.

"……”

Rie, sitting and scanning through some documents, sipped her coffee and responded, appearing rather laid back.

To some, it might seem normal.

However, knowing her usual behavior, something felt off.

I calmly walked over, set my bag on my seat, and sat down.

"Oh, by the way, what about the documents related to the upcoming Homecoming Day?"

"They're right here."

Rie stood up and walked over to me.

I observed her intently.

Avoiding my gaze, Rie looked down as she approached and placed the documents in front of me.

Then, she tried to return to her seat.

"Rie."

I called out to her.

"Hm?"

Rie turned her head, glancing my way.

"Ah……”

Upon meeting my eyes, she quickly averted her gaze.

I sighed deeply.

“…Why are you acting like this?"

"What, what, what do you mean?"

Rie said, avoiding my gaze.

"We haven't had a proper conversation since I returned from the North."

"We… we talk all the time!"

I stood up, grabbing Rie by the head, forcing her to look me in the eye.

"Conversations involve looking the other person in the eye."

When I forced Rie to meet my gaze, her eyes widened in surprise.

"I, I've been looking at you while… while talking, haven't I?"

Indeed, she makes eye contact initially.

But she becomes extremely flustered after doing so.

She tried to maintain a casual demeanor, but her pupils continuously darted around.

I narrowed my eyes and asked,

"Have you done something wrong?"

"No, there's nothing like that!"

"Then why can't you look at me properly?"

"I can!"

Defensively, Rie stared into my eyes, as if she was trying to win a staring contest.

And then…

“…Why are you laughing?"

"I, I'm not laughing!"

The corners of Rie's mouth started to twitch upwards.

She tried to force her smile away, but it was evident she was struggling.

That silly smile kept trying to break through.

"That's enough! I have things to do; I'll leave first!"

Rie quickly grabbed her bag and freed herself from my grasp.

"Alright, take care."

"Y-yeah……”

She replied and quickly left the student council room.

CHAPTER 127
RIE VON RISTONIA (3)

"Why on earth am I so flustered?!"

Rie exclaimed upon returning to her dormitory.

"Ugh…!"

She threw the teddy bear that was beside her onto the bed.

Then, she began to fiercely pummel the stuffed animal with her fists.

"Rie Von Ristonia, you idiot!"

Her plan.

To woo Rudy.

It had been ruined a long time ago.

Now, her concerns were entirely different.

"How did I act around Rudy again…?"

Rie hadn't seen Rudy's face for two weeks.

And so, she had forgotten how she used to interact with him.

Before, everything had felt so natural, but after not seeing him for so long, it felt strange.

A certain discomfort, a prickling sensation.

She wasn’t used to this feeling.

Still, Rie had stayed in the student council room, trying to get accustomed to it.

She assumed this feeling would be temporary.

But seeing herself still feeling out of place even after several days made her feel utterly foolish.

Rie picked up the teddy bear lying on the floor.

Gazing deeply into its button eyes, she muttered as if speaking to a person.

"What should I do? What should I possibly do…"

She pouted and complained.

It looked as if she was throwing a tantrum at the teddy bear.

With a sigh, she embraced the stuffed animal once more.

"Ah… I feel like I have more work coming up…"

Lately, Rie had been juggling her thoughts about Rudy and her student council duties.

The upcoming Homecoming Day.

There was a lot to prepare for the event.

Additionally, she had another investigation ongoing.

The Saint, Haruna.

She had been investigating her.

Yet, no matter how deep she dug, she couldn't find anything.

Where Haruna came from, how she entered the temple, and why she held the position of the Saint.

Other than the fact that she could see the future, there was little else known about

her.

Even using the royal secret service yielded barely any information.

She had momentarily let go of her investigation, but upon hearing about the upcoming Homecoming Day, she resumed her pursuit of Haruna's background.

This time, not only was she using the secret service of the royal family, but she also employed the resources of the student council.

She even sought help from Astina.

Rie thought that since Astina had conversed with the Saint during the last Homecoming Day and had gained her trust, Astina might know something.

With that investigation ongoing and her responsibilities as the vice president for the Homecoming Day preparations, her plate was full.

But thoughts of Rudy kept invading her mind, making her even more melancholic.

She didn't want to be apart from him.

The two weeks without him had been torturous.

She didn't want to endure that again.

Hugging the teddy bear close, Rie lay down on her bed.

"Sigh… What should I do?"

Between investigating the Saint and preparing for Homecoming Day…

"Ugh… What am I even doing?!"

Frustrated, Rie flung the teddy bear aside and abruptly sat up on her bed.

"Right, moping around like this just isn't like me. Yes."

Rie clenched her fist.

Wallowing in solitude was not her style.

She believed in facing problems head-on.

Confronting them squarely and breaking through.

That was the First Princess of the Empire, Rie Von Ristonia.

"Yes, everything will eventually be alright if we're together! Just the two of us!"

Rie made up her mind.

To tackle everything at once.

The preparations for Homecoming Day and the awkwardness of being with Rudy.

She was determined to address both these matters simultaneously.

“Dessert?”

“Yeah, let’s pick out desserts for Homecoming Day.”

On Homecoming Day, a place is provided for graduates to gather and drink tea.

The academy couldn't prepare the desserts needed for the occasion.

There was a lot to prepare, and given that many of the academy graduates were of high status, there was concern over the potential embarrassment if the quality was poor.

So, they made an arrangement with a bakery outside the academy to supply the desserts.

Hearing Rie's suggestion, Rudy tilted his head.

“Why don't we just send someone else? Emily seems fit for the job. She’s good with such tasks.”

From beside Kuhn, Emily interjected,

“Should I handle it?”

However, Rie gently shook her head.

Although she acknowledged Emily's capabilities, especially when it came to financial matters, this wasn’t the task for her.

“Emily isn’t part of the student council. We can’t always rely on her.”

Rie said, patting Emily’s back, as if feeling sorry for her.

Emily was always in the student council room as if she was one of them.

She often worked at the student council office with Kuhn, especially when Rudy was there, even if she had her research to attend to.

But that wasn't the real reason.

Rie simply wanted to go out with Rudy.

“Let's just go out for a while. It’s been some time since we had a break.”

Rie suggested.

Rudy gave her a puzzled look.

Both Kuhn and Emily alternated glances between Rudy and Rie.

Sensing the tension, Emily stood up.

“Seniors, take a short break! You must be feeling a bit stiff from being in the student council room all the time!”

With a soft smile, Rie said.

“Alright, Rudy, let's step out for a bit.”

After a moment’s thought, Rudy agreed.

“Fine. I had some things to buy anyway. A short break won’t hurt.”

“Things to buy?”

“Yeah, I’ve been working on something recently.”

Rie paused in thought, then muttered to herself,

"Whatever."

"Well, we'll be back in a bit."

“Take care!”

“See you soon.”

Kuhn and Emily watched the pair leave the student council room.

Once they were out of sight, Emily turned to Kuhn,

"By the way… Weren't Rudy and Luna dating?"

“I’m… not really sure,”

Kuhn replied.

The two delved deep into thought, scratching their chins.

Rie and Rudy left Kuhn and Emily in the student council office and slowly walked outside the academy.

But there was a problem.

Although Rie had confidently invited Rudy out, she hadn’t spoken a word since.

‘What… what should I say?’

She pondered over various topics:

The correlation between magic and alchemy.

The geometric magic principles of Liberion.

The mana circuit analysis of magic swordsmen…

Yet every topic felt oddly out of place.

A topic more fitting for a debate hall.

Not between a man and a woman… No, it wasn't a topic worth discussing between friends.

Rie pondered.

'What exactly did I usually talk about with Rudy?'

Ironically, the more she pondered the topic of their conversation, the more tongue-tied she became.

Rudy looked intently at Rie.

She was lost in thought, gazing up at the sky as she walked aimlessly.

No matter how one looked, she seemed off.

Rudy was the first to break the silence.

"So which dessert shop are we heading to? The one we always go to?"

"Huh?"

Rie responded, caught off-guard by Rudy's sudden question.

Rudy frowned at her reaction.

"Did you come out without a plan?"

At Rudy's words, Rie raised an eyebrow.

"Do you think I'm you?"

Rudy smirked at her response.

"Why not that place then? It's delicious there."

"It's too pricey there. Doesn't fit our budget."

"Weren't we preparing for some premium desserts?"

Rie shook her head.

"I said we need to prepare premium desserts, not that we have to buy them from a premium shop."

Rudy narrowed his eyes at her explanation.

"What do you mean?"

"In short, even if the taste is a bit lacking, as long as it looks luxurious on the outside, that's enough."

“…Is that okay?"

"No one is going there specifically for the desserts."

"Is that so…?"

"If we prepare a lot of delicious desserts, most will go to waste. Collaborating with such bakeries is a waste of money."

Nodding, Rudy seemed to see the logic in Rie's words.

"How do you know all this even though you're a princess?"

"Because I've done this before."

"You have?"

At this, Rie smirked.

"Did you think being a princess meant I was some sheltered flower?"

"Well, not exactly."

Rudy paused for a moment and then looked intently at Rie.

"Come to think of it, it's odd. Yuni always has someone else do even the smallest tasks for her, right?"

"You're comparing me to her?"

Rie tossed her hair back, answering with confidence.

“…So what's different?"

"Yuni grew up pampered by those noble brats. That's why she turned out that way. I pushed all those disgusting guys away."

"Oh…”

Rudy let out an admiring whistle.

"So everyone becomes an enemy. Makes you care even about small things."

"I've had my fair share of enemies too, you know?"

At Rudy's words, Rie gave him a sharp look.

"You never seem to care about any of it."

"What don't I care about?"

"Do you even know how many enemies you've made that Astina and I have had to deal with?"

"…?"

Rudy furrowed his brows.

Though he said he had enemies, no one significant came to mind.

At the beginning of the term, he remembered that red-headed guy.

However, when he had that incident with that guy, he had only just met Rie.

"I can't recall anything specific. I don't particularly dislike anyone either."

“Rudy, people can harbor resentment over the most trivial of actions."

Rie remarked, clicking her tongue.

"Is that so?"

"You don't realize it, that's why you're not bothered."

Rudy, looking puzzled, shook his head lightly and continued walking.

Rie watched him and chuckled softly.

'Hmm…?'

Suddenly, Rie realized something.

They were talking quite comfortably.

She wondered, tilting her head, why their conversation was flowing so naturally.

Then, she glanced at Rudy ahead of her.

Rudy still seemed lost in his thoughts.

Observing him, a small smile crept onto Rie's face.

“Whatever.”

She then hurriedly caught up to Rudy and playfully patted his back.

Thud!

"Ow! What the—?”

Rudy, startled by the sudden slap, turned to Rie with a puzzled expression.

“Not this way. The place I've got in mind is over there. Let's go,”

Rie said, flashing a pleasant smile.

CHAPTER 128
RIE VON RISTONIA (4)

"Should we wrap it up for today?"

I set down the mana stone I was handling and spoke to Yuni.

Hearing my words, Yuni, who was deeply focused on drawing a magic circle, raised her shoulders and responded.

"Huh? Already?"

Her lips twitched in mild disappointment.

Lately, Yuni has been deeply invested in staff-making.

Maybe out of genuine interest, she often came in early to prepare for our experiments, even without me asking.

Thanks to her enthusiasm, our research was progressing smoothly.

Yuni stopped drawing her magic circle, rose from her seat, and asked,

"You're finishing up a bit early today?"

"Ah, I have some tasks at the student council."

I recalled placing an order at the bakery, which had informed me that they'd be sending dessert samples to the student council.

Rie and I had planned to go through them, maybe even conduct a tasting session.

I'd already sampled some desserts from that bakery, but Rie had pointed out a few adjustments, and I needed to check on those.

"In that case, I'll stay and study a bit more before heading out,"

Yuni said.

"Alright. I'll be on my way."

"Oh! Rudy."

As I was about to exit the lab, Yuni's voice stopped me.

"Ena mentioned she might drop by later?"

"Ah, Ena?"

I had made a request to Ena.

It was about crafting the frame for the staff.

Typically, wizards create the mana stones for staffs, but alchemists often craft the rod part of the staff.

Alchemists generally split into two fields: potion-making and metallurgy.

They don't solely focus on one domain like wizards do; they just have areas they're better at.

Many tend to be proficient in both fields.

Lately, Ena had shown an increasing interest in metallurgy.

Since she was the most approachable among the alchemy department students and her current interest seemed to align with my request, I had approached her.

"Got it. Keep up the hard work."

"Yes~ Do your best with your tasks, senior."

With a wave to Yuni, I headed towards the student council room.

"Ah, you're here?"

Entering the council room, Rie greeted me, and a spread of over ten different desserts lay before me.

"Wow… That's a lot."

"Yeah, they prepared every variety I had asked for."

Displayed on the table were cakes, tarts, and cookies, making my mouth water.

They'd undoubtedly be delicious, but tasting each one might just be a bit overwhelming.

"Should we have some tea while we taste?"

Normally, cold milk would be perfect with these desserts.

However, the idea of having milk here felt somewhat odd.

While lukewarm or warm milk was fine, cold milk – the ideal companion to such snacks – was hard to come by.

Firstly, the ice magic required to cool it down was an advanced spell.

Moreover, the weather was getting hotter, so naturally producing such chilled milk was nearly impossible.

"I knew you'd want some, so I boiled it in advance."

Rie said with a smile, bringing over a tea kettle.

“Oh~.”

It seemed Rie had the same idea as me.

Truthfully, Rie wasn't the type to indulge much in desserts.

She wasn’t particularly fond of sweet things, so when she visited a bakery, she’d usually sip on tea and perhaps sample a dessert or two.

She only truly went for desserts when meeting someone.

This was in stark contrast to Luna, who frequently enjoyed desserts on her own.

Accepting a cup of tea from Rie, I approached the spread of desserts.

“Shall we try them one by one?”

I noticed that there was a fork placed next to each plate where the desserts were laid out.

Without much thought, I picked up a fork.

And then, I moved my hand towards the strawberry cake in front of Rie.

I chose it because I thought if I started with something too sweet, I might not be able to eat the other desserts.

“Wait a moment.”

Rie stopped me.

“I placed a fork for each plate to prevent the flavors from mixing. Use the fork next to each dessert only for that particular one.”

“Oh, really?”

Without thinking much of it, I set down the fork I was holding.

But as I reached for the fork next to the strawberry cake, Rie swiftly snatched it up.

I shot her a glare.

"Give it to me. I want to eat that."

Rie laughed teasingly.

"But I want some too."

Without hesitation, Rie used the fork to cut a small piece of the strawberry cake and popped it into her mouth.

“Mmm! It’s delicious!”

She exaggerated her delight, clearly teasing me.

“Alright… Hand it over. My turn.”

I reached out for the fork.

“Hm?”

Rie tilted her head, playing coy.

“There’s only one fork beside the dessert, isn’t there?”

Holding the fork in her mouth, she scanned the dessert selection.

“…Seems so.”

She looked down as if she had just realized it.

“Give it, I want to eat too.”

And as I reached out, she glanced between the fork she held and me.

“…You want to use this?”

“You started this.”

I frowned.

As I said that, Rie hesitated to hand the fork over.

"You're not suggesting things like an indirect kiss or saying it's dirty, are you?"

"What, what?"

I smirked at Rie's reaction.

“Surely our esteemed Princess Rie isn’t acting like a little child over something like this? Besides, it’s just between us.”

I emphasized the words 'little child' and 'between us.'

Of course, sharing a fork like this wasn't proper etiquette, especially for nobles.

But when have Rie and I ever been particular about such things?

I intentionally mentioned that aspect to prevent Rie from making any excuses.

Regardless of how carefree Rie might be, she is still a princess.

It was clear that sharing a fork would definitely make things awkward.

Since Rie teased me with the cake first, I decided to playfully tease her back in the same manner.

Rie shot me a piercing glare.

“You want to try it?”

“Try what? I just want to eat my cake.”

I replied cheekily, and Rie chuckled.

“Okay~ then eat~.”

Rie then took her fork and approached the strawberry cake with it.

“Give me the fork.”

When I asked, Rie took a piece of the strawberry cake and held it out to me.

“Eat.”

“…What?”

Rie shook the fork as if encouraging me to take a bite.

“Why bother exchanging forks? It’s just between us.”

Rie looked at me with a victorious smile, as if she'd won the round.

I usually don't care about such things, but there's a difference between sharing a fork and feeding each other.

They are entirely different realms.

Feeding each other is something couples do, right?

But I had my pride.

I won't be defeated so easily.

“Ah.”

I opened my mouth, hinting for Rie to feed me.

Seeing this, Rie's eyes widened and her cheeks turned red.

“Ugh……”

Rie pursed her lips and hesitantly brought the fork towards my mouth.

“Hmm.”

I bit down on the fork and tasted the cake.

The sweet taste of the fresh cream in the strawberry cake should have been memorable… but I couldn’t savor it properly.

The awkwardness of our actions overshadowed the taste.

Feeling the atmosphere getting tense, I loosened my tie slightly.

Yet, the game wasn't over.

Let's see who wins this round.

I glanced at the tart in front of me.

I took another fork and cut a piece.

“Now, you eat.”

I said with a mischievous grin, offering the tart to Rie.

“Uh-uh-uh…”

Rie’s face reddened further, and she took a small step back.

“What? Not eating?”

I smirked.

“I-I will eat!”

Rie shouted back defiantly, her eyes wide.

She pushed her hair behind her ear and brought her mouth closer to the fork.

“Uh… Ugh.”

I stared intently at Rie, feeling both a rush of warmth to my cheeks and a pang of guilt.

I thought only the person being fed would feel embarrassed, but I realized feeding someone could be just as awkward.

As Rie was about to bite the fork, my face flaming red…

Suddenly, the door to the student council room opened.

“Oh, Rudy. You asked for…”

It was Ena.

She entered and dropped the sticks she was holding with a clatter.

Rie and I were caught in the act – me feeding Rie a piece of tart and both of us blushing.

“S-sorry!!! I should've… I should've knocked! Ah! I didn’t knock! Oh, the professor

sent me on an errand! Right, right. I'll come back later? Sorry? I'll go now."

Ena spoke in a rapid-fire manner and ran out of the room.

She didn't even think of picking up the items she dropped.

She just dashed off.

"Ena? Hey, it's not what you think! Hey!"

I called after her, but she was long gone.

"Ah… oh no…"

Rie looked in the direction Ena had vanished, a despairing look on her face.

Then, she turned to me with teary eyes.

"You idiot! This is all your fault!"

"You started it!"

I retorted, feeling unfairly blamed.

Persia family mansion.

"Another dimension, huh…"

Seated in her study, Astina crossed her arms and gazed up at the ceiling.

Before her lay a fairytale-like book.

Though termed a fairy tale, it was more a tome on myths — myths about the creation of this world.

[God commanded space to exist, and then time.]

[That space and time birthed multiple worlds, termed dimensions.]

Astina mulled over this passage multiple times.

"A different… dimension…”

Undoubtedly, the place Rudy came from was distinctly different from here.

Another dimension.

While one might argue it's a tad unusual, it wasn't utterly bizarre.

After all, there were tales of others who hailed from different dimensions.

Astina's eyes shifted to the empire's historical record placed beside the fairy tale.

Written within were accounts of:

[The First Saint, an individual from another dimension, foresaw the future and brought prosperity to the people.]

This referred to the very first saint, revered since antiquity.

However, Rudy's case seemed slightly different.

She distinctly proclaimed she came from the future.

Given that this claim was also documented in the Royal records, it likely held truth.

Astina clicked her tongue, murmuring to herself.

"I assumed it was a mere scam…”

The tale of the First Saint was renowned throughout the empire.

A mere illusion spun by the church.

A deceiver who fabricated miracles.

Given that the church wasn't a particularly powerful faction, seen more as just a band of swindlers extracting wealth from the masses in the name of God's will — such rumors flourished.

In an empire that was not particularly religious, the church held such a reputation.

However, Rudy's testimony and evidence began to lend some credence to the tale.

"Hmm…"

Lastly, Astina glanced over Rie's letter.

[Investigate the Saint.]

It was a brief message.

At some point, Rie had taken to speaking to her in a less formal manner.

Still, it didn't particularly irk Astina.

"Maybe it's time to shake the church up a bit?"

With Rie's request in mind and her own suspicions about the church, there was no reason to delay.

After all, even if Astina were to create a ruckus at the church, they wouldn't dare utter a word.

The church's influence had waned long ago.

Had it not been for the Saint who claimed to foresee the future, the church, already teetering, would have collapsed by now.

They clung to life by the barest thread.

"Well then, shall we?"

With a sly smile, Astina rose from her seat.

CHAPTER 129
RIE VON RISTONIA (5)

“Luna!!!”

“Ugh…”

Luna sat in front of Ena as if she had committed a crime.

Having witnessed the behavior between Rie and Rudy, Ena approached Luna.

Luna, who had been working diligently in the lab, was deeply shocked by the story.

The two decided to step outside to discuss further, settling on a bench in the academy garden.

After saying everything, Ena decided not to say anything more.

She figured the person who must be feeling the most frustrated right now would be Luna.

“What on earth happened?”

Ena was at a loss.

The person who had gone to the north with him was Luna.

If anything, it was his and Luna's relationship that should have improved.

“I don’t really know either…”

Luna said with a dejected face.

Were Rie and Rudy dating already?

Luna's mind swirled with confusion.

When Luna last visited the student council office, there was no hint of any such atmosphere between them.

To comfort Luna, Ena spoke up,

“For starters… they don’t seem to be dating.”

“But…”

“Sure, it’s not the greatest situation.”

“So, it's really like that, isn't it…?”

Luna sighed deeply, looking down.

“But remember, crises can turn into opportunities.”

“Huh?”

Luna looked up in surprise.

“Do you know what made it difficult to approach Rudy?”

“To approach Rudy?”

Luna tilted her head, thinking.

“Because he’s the son of a Duke?”

It was a realistic point.

Rudy belonged to the empire’s Ducal family, making him nearly inaccessible.

Luna had naturally gotten closer to him and developed feelings, but for most others, he was a distant figure.

But that wasn’t the only thing bothering Luna.

She was the daughter of an ordinary noble.

Even if she inherited her family's title, breaking through those social boundaries wasn't easy.

"Well, that's one factor. But honestly, that's not the main issue."

"Huh?"

"If Rudy falls for you, would titles or statuses matter? Love knows no such barriers!"

"But… isn't that only in romance novels?"

"No! Those novels are all based on reality!"

Ena declared firmly.

It wasn't incorrect.

The empire had a more relaxed view on status than one might assume.

While there were distinctions between ranks, love and relationships tended to be free from those constraints.

High-ranking nobles, even emperors, often took commoner spouses.

Love was typically the foundation for marriages, with strategic marriages being a rarity.

"So… am I lacking compared to Rie?"

Rie.

She was the princess, the vice-president of the student council, and she shone brilliantly in every aspect.

With that, Ena reached out and gently cupped Luna's cheek.

"Why so down?"

Ena grinned, playfully pinching Luna's cheek.

"You're this adorable and pretty, aren't you? Plus, you're academically better than Rie. And in both the lab and the student council, everyone acknowledges your abilities."

"Really?"

"Of course."

Ena then took a seat beside Luna, their arms brushing against each other.

"And, compared to Rie, you have… this."

Ena sat down next to Luna and playfully poked at Luna's rather prominent chest.

"Ena!"

Blushing profusely, Luna quickly covered her chest.

Watching Luna's flustered reaction, Ena let out a mischievous laugh.

"I wonder how much our Luna has grown?"

"You're such a pervert…"

Ena chuckled, relaxing her expression.

"The point is, you're not lacking in any way!"

"I… I guess."

Luna responded and fell into deep thought.

Still, nothing else seemed to come to mind.

"So, why is it hard to approach him?"

At this, Ena chuckled and pointed at Luna.

"It's because he doesn't see a girl as a girl. Just as a friend."

"Huh?"

"Luna."

Ena looked straight into Luna's eyes, questioning.

"Have you ever seen Rudy act shy?"

After pondering for a moment, Luna couldn't recall any specific instance.

Noticing Luna's reaction, Ena continued,

"Or, has he ever stared at a girl passing by, maybe at her legs or chest?"

"Rudy would never do that!"

Luna's defensive outburst brought a smile to Ena's face.

Usually, Luna would just laugh it off, but her reaction now clearly showed how much she cared about Rudy.

"But most guys typically look at those places, you know."

Hearing this, Luna furrowed her brows, giving Ena a concerned look.

"Well, I don't think he does."

"See?"

"Wait, is Rudy… like a girl? Now that I think about it, he does have some pretty features…"

"What are you even saying…"

Their conversation was going well, but Luna's unexpected comment made Ena sigh.

"Anyway, the important thing is that Rudy needs to recognize the dynamics between men and women!"

"Dynamics between men and women!"

Luna repeated Ena's statement as if having an epiphany.

"So, what should you do?"

Pumped up by Ena's words, Luna clenched her fist and declared,

"Make him see me as a woman!"

Hearing this, a proud smile appeared on Ena's face.

"All the advice I've given over the years has finally paid off!"

Ena pointed towards the student council room window.

"Go on, Luna!"

"Yeah! But…"

"Hm?"

Luna gave an awkward smile.

"I've got a ton of work piled up right now… I should probably finish that first…"

"Oh…"

Confronted by this realistic concern, Ena just nodded.

"Right, work is important, after all…"

"Senior, are you dating my sister?"

"Ack… Cough, cough…"

I coughed, caught off guard by the sudden question.

"Why… would you think that?"

"Well, Ena asked me about it yesterday."

I blushed, recalling the scene where I shared cake with Rie the day before.

"Wait, is it true?"

Seeing my reaction, Yuni's expression turned cold.

A fierce look crossed her face.

"No! There was a misunderstanding. I've spoken with Ena about it."

I did talk about it.

More of a clarification than a conversation, really…

Regardless, the incident was water under the bridge.

"Did you get the sticks from Ena?"

I meant the rod used for the staff.

Instead of answering, Yuni fixed me with an icy stare.

"Don't change the subject."

I was taken aback by this unfamiliar side of her.

“…Yes,"

I replied, my voice lacking any confidence or authority.

Why was she acting this way now?

I hadn't seen this kind of intensity from her, not even during the student council elections.

"You didn’t mess with my sister, did you?"

"Mess with…?"

Yuni let out a chuckle, but it was devoid of warmth.

"Many men have tried to woo my sister."

"I… I see."

"Do you know what happened to those men?"

"I'm not sure…”

With a mischievous glint in her eye, Yuni said,

"I'll leave that to your imagination!"

"…”

"But since you say it's a misunderstanding~"

Yuni's demeanor shifted back to her usual cheerful self.

"You're not like them, right? I want to be on good terms with you, Senior."

"Yeah, sure."

Her sudden change left me reeling, but I managed a response.

What was going on with her?

Yet, something became clear.

The fate of the men who showed interest in Rie…

"You really care about your sister, huh?"

"Of course. She's family, isn't she?"

"Huh?"

I was taken aback by her unexpected response.

"Then why did you interfere in the student council elections? Rie was aiming for the vice-president's position."

"When did I ever interfere?"

Yuni tilted her head in confusion.

"You wanted to win. But we…"

I stopped, recalling a memory.

When I had confronted Yuni before, she had said:

-I would have still resigned. Being the student council president is tough. And I hate anything that's hard.

Realization dawned on me.

She was never interested in the presidency.

Her sole objective had been to date me.

"Realized my innocence now?"

Yuni leaned back, grinning at me.

Come to think of it, it was odd.

Why did she want to date me?

I never got to hear that story.

"So why did you want to…"

"I'm not telling."

Yuni interrupted before I could finish.

"Everyone has secrets they wish to hide, don't they? But!"

“But?”

“If you agree to go out with me now? I might be willing to share~. So, will you date me?”

I sighed at Yuni's words.

"Just some friendly advice from a senior: stop saying things like that."

"We both know it's just a joke, right? I know you're not interested in dating. And you know I don't have feelings for you."

She said it so casually, no hint of deception.

I let out another sigh.

But seeing Yuni this straightforward, I no longer felt threatened by her.

Granted, Yuni sides with the aristocrats and aims for the throne, so competition is inevitable someday.

However, I doubted it would escalate to life-or-death levels.

"Speaking of which, did you get those sticks from Ena?"

“Yes, I did. You're planning to merge it with the mana stone, right?”

"No, I lack the skill for that… I have someone else in mind to do it."

"Oh? Who might that be?"

Shortly after.

"What is this now?”

An older man, still groggy from sleep, squinted at us.

"How does a respectable professor end up sleeping in such a place?”

Robert, placing aside the book that had been carelessly covering his face, settled into his seat.

“What’s with you? Haven’t seen your face in a while.”

“I may have been busy, but I haven’t neglected my studies in dark magic. Anyway, I need a favor.”

“Huh, always coming to me when you need something. Am I just a tool to you? And who’s she?”

“Wow… Is this person really a professor?”

Yuni was genuinely astonished.

Truth be told, I felt similarly when I first met Professor Robert.

But to hear Yuni voice it out loud was quite something.

Robert frowned deeply.

“I break out in hives whenever I'm near someone like her.”

"You've conversed with Rie a few times, haven't you?”

"She's sharp. This one, not so much."

"Wow, watch your words. How uncouth~."

“What did you say?”

“Pro, Professor! My apologies!”

I hurriedly intervened between Robert and Yuni.

Did I make a mistake introducing them?

In many ways, they were polar opposites yet oddly similar.

Yuni, despite her noble demeanor and adherence to etiquette, was oblivious and

often blurted out whatever came to mind.

Robert, on the other hand, had long abandoned any semblance of etiquette and lived life in a rather unrefined manner.

They're opposites, yet there's a weird similarity.

"Anyway, we three have to work together for a while, so try to get along."

“If Rudy says so."

"I'd rather not, especially with this brat."

I leaned in and whispered to Professor Robert.

“She's currently working as an assistant to Professor Gracie. And I hold authority over that."

No further explanation was needed.

It was simply the dynamics between a professor and an assistant.

That was all he needed to know.

Robert smirked and gave me a thumbs up.

"Sounds good."

"Since it's assistance between our labs, I'll discuss the details about compensation and any other aspects separately."

"Just take care of it however you want. It's a hassle for me. Let Borval know. He'll handle it."

Come to think of it, I haven't seen Borval recently.

I used to frequently see him training on the sports field, but I haven't seen him since he became a full-fledged teaching assistant in his third year.

Probably busy with teaching assistant duties.

I should catch up with him soon.

"Understood."

I nodded.

Professor Robert then stood up from his seat.

"Have you eaten?"

"Not yet."

It was about dinner time.

"Let's go to that place, along with this youngster."

My eyes widened in surprise.

"That sounds great. I've been so busy lately and haven't been able to go."

“…Where are you talking about?"

I smiled at Yuni.

"A restaurant with the taste of heaven."

"Oh…”

Yuni grinned contentedly.

"Do you think they can satisfy my palate? I fancy myself a bit of a foodie."

"Absolutely."

I replied with confidence.

And so…

We headed to the fermented bean paste stew restaurant.

CHAPTER 130
PREPARATION (1)

I walked down the corridor.

Recently, with my busy schedule, I hadn't been able to focus on other matters.

But now, I was starting to sense something wrong.

It was about Yeniel.

It felt like an eternity since she was supposed to return.

There hadn't been any news of her either, which was concerning.

I made a decision.

I needed to meet someone who knew about Yeniel.

And that person was none other than Principal McDowell.

He, along with Astina and me, knew that Yeniel was affiliated with The Rebels.

Among us, he was likely the one with the most information.

If Yeniel's status as a double agent for the rebels was exposed…

She might be subject to severe torture.

To protect Yeniel's identity, the number of people in the know was kept to a minimum.

That's why McDowell was my only option for information about her.

Also, I needed to discuss something with McDowell.

The leader of the Rebels had mentioned wanting to meet me.

I pondered over this for a while.

Why did the leader want to see me?

I wasn't completely sure of the reason.

However, there was one thing.

Something originally happened at this point in time with the rebels.

Rudy Astria's sudden change of allegiance.

He unexpectedly joins the rebels and attempts to kill Evan during a joint exercise.

However, that incident wasn't going to happen now.

The problem was around this time was when the Rebels made contact with Rudy.

"Rudy Astria here. May I come in?"

So, I planned to talk with McDowell about this.

If the leader of the Rebels is seeking me out directly, surely there's a way to use this to our advantage?

Moreover, I'd heard that the leader was injured.

Approaching at a time when he's weakened felt like an opportunity.

An opportunity to capture the leader.

A mix of unease and hope bubbled within me.

Without the leader, the dreaded 'annihilation ending' where everyone in the academy perishes might be avoidable.

A chance to end all this and live happily might be within reach if we could eliminate the leader, Aryandor.

"Come in,"

A voice beckoned from inside the principal's office.

"…?"

It wasn't McDowell's voice.

Feeling confused, I entered nonetheless.

Opening the door, my suspicion was confirmed.

"Professor Cromwell… No, Vice Principal. Why are you here?"

There he was, donning glasses and handling some documents.

Cromwell sat in the principal's chair, processing paperwork.

"Ah, the Principal had to step out for a bit, so I'm handling some of his duties,"

Cromwell replied nonchalantly, removing his glasses.

"Do you have something to say to the Principal?"

"Well, I do, but…"

I was lost in thought for a moment.

When will the Principal return?

It wasn't just a simple matter to just pass on.

It could be a golden opportunity to capture the leader of the rebels.

"Excuse me… Do you know when the Principal will return?"

Cromwell crossed his arms and stared intently at me.

"Are you looking for the principal to cause more trouble?"

"Ahaha… not exactly trouble…"

I said with an awkward smile.

However, I felt slightly wronged.

Have I ever caused any trouble?

Aren't I always bringing good things like a lucky charm?

Cromwell pointed his finger towards the door.

"Huh?"

Suddenly, I was drawn inward, and the door I was holding shut with a loud bang.

It seemed Cromwell used telekinesis magic.

"Silent."

He then cast another spell, preventing sound from escaping our vicinity.

After using the spells, Cromwell sighed and spoke.

"You seem to have something important."

Cromwell looked quite serious.

"Go ahead, tell me."

Seeing him like this, I felt there was no use in hesitating.

"Can we discuss it together with the Principal? It's important."

"The Principal won't be here for a while."

"…What?"

It wasn't uncommon for the Principal to be absent for a while, but he often visited the academy when needed.

Seeing my bewildered expression, Cromwell elaborated.

"The Principal is seriously injured."

I was taken aback.

Principal McDowell, injured?

He wasn't just any person.

In terms of strength in the empire, he was among the top five.

The highest-ranking wizard of flash magic.

Who could harm such a person…

"Was it the leader of the rebels?"

At my words, Cromwell's eyes widened.

"How do you know that?"

I began to understand the situation.

There were only a few who could hurt the leader or the Principal.

And if those two clashed…

I decided to explain everything to Cromwell.

"I came because of the rebels."

I began to lay out everything to Cromwell.

I also asked.

How did McDowell get hurt?

"He was injured trying to save someone named Yeniel."

"Ah…"

I sighed.

Knowing McDowell's nature, it made sense.

He was the type to risk his life for anyone in the academy.

But it was reassuring to hear.

"The good news is, neither of their lives are in danger. They can't move right now though…"

I nodded in response to Cromwell's words.

"So, what will you do now? About the rebels…"

"Even if the leader of the rebels is injured, we can't be reckless. It seems he isn't as hurt as the Principal."

Considering McDowell fought while protecting Yeniel, this was expected.

"However, we must take measures to protect you."

Cromwell stood up and patted my shoulder.

"Don't worry. We'll prepare as best as we can. If we do it right, we might even be able to eliminate him."

With a troubled heart, I headed toward Professor Robert's laboratory.

McDowell isn't at the academy.

And in such a place, the leader of the Rebels arrives.

If he came alone, we might stand a chance.

No matter how potent his time magic is, it has its limits.

Time magic.

Its power is incomparable, almost on par with the Astria family's space magic.

But it doesn't possess the destructive force of space magic.

However, the real issue is the user.

The leader of the Rebels, Aryandor.

He's not just any ordinary wizard.

He's a wizard swordsman.

A rare individual who wields both magic and the sword.

A unique case that's hard to come across in a lifetime.

A talent that is said to emerge only once in a millennium.

Someone capable of handling two forms of mana.

Normally, magic and sword aura can't coexist, but he has the ability to meld them seamlessly in battle.

A realm often considered beyond human capabilities.

Of course, there's is someone within the academy with similar potential…

Perhaps with that person's help, we can find the wizard swordsman's weakness?

With these thoughts in mind, I entered Professor Robert's lab.

"Incredible. What kind of training have you undergone…?"

"…?"

As I entered Robert's lab, there was a guy I hardly recognized.

A man, gazing at Borval with shining eyes.

"Ah, Rudy Astria has arrived."

Borval noticed me and spoke up.

"Yes… Professor Robert called me to his lab…"

My voice trailed off as I looked at the young man beside him.

He met my gaze with a twinkle in his eye.

"Hello! I'm Diark Verdès, a first-year student in the Magic Department!"

With a burst of enthusiasm, Diark greeted me, making me frown a bit.

Diark… Diark…

"Oh?"

Diark Verdès.

A talent rare as once in a millennium.

A being that transcended human limitations.

Someone who has a similar ability to the leader of the Rebels.

He was the top student in the Magic Department, a first-year student, renowned for having the talent of a wizard swordsman.

Of course, while the leader of the Rebels wielded both the sword and time magic, Diark would be considered much below him.

Come to think of it, I've met him before.

I believe he participated in Yuni's student council.

I looked directly at Diark standing before me.

However, there was something off about his gaze.

His eyes sparkled as he looked at me with admiration.

I wasn't used to such intense gazes and felt slightly uncomfortable.

"Why are you here?"

Feeling uneasy under his gaze, I took a step back as I questioned him.

"Ah…! I've been learning a thing or two from Borval!"

Diark responded, standing straight like a new recruit brimming with pride.

"From Borval?"

I was puzzled.

Is he implying he's learning dark magic?

From what I know, Diark belongs to a quite renowned family, doesn't he?

While I had a grasp on most of the main characters' backgrounds, my memory about this particular fellow was fuzzy.

Originally, he was a one-off antagonist who went after Evan.

A clichéd story about a freshman, the most powerful in his year, challenging the top second-year student.

It was a predictable outcome.

His easy defeat didn’t need any elaboration.

Thus, I didn't know anything more about him.

“I didn’t come here to learn dark magic. Out of nowhere, they said I had the talent of a magic swordsman and began talking to me about it."

Hearing his story, I knit my brows.

"I've been thinking that maybe someone like Borval could also be a type of magic swordsman! That's why, as someone on the same path, I wanted to observe and learn from his journey!"

At Diark's words, I gave him a baffled look.

You could argue that, in some ways, Borval, who uses magic and wields an axe, could be considered a magic axeman.

But there was a distinct difference from a magic swordsman.

The inability to harness sword aura.

Even if one could enhance their physique, if they couldn't use sword aura, they couldn't truly be on the same path.

"Moreover, I've heard Rudy Astria is also on a similar path!"

Diark spoke with such fervor, as if deeply moved, closing his eyes and nodding.

"The way Rudy Astria has achieved so much, tackling monumental tasks and yet still pioneering a new path… It's truly inspiring! It's remarkable!

I aspire to be like you!"

"Could you… maybe lower your voice a bit?"

Why on earth was he behaving like this?

I was taken aback by Diark's fanatic admiration.

What had I done to him?

I couldn't recall interacting with him at all.

Nevertheless, there was no reason to reject someone's admiration.

I was trying to find a magic swordsman to understand their abilities better.

If someone like that genuinely admired and approached me with such enthusiasm,

why wouldn't that be a good thing?

A grin formed on my face.

“Right, you should also give it your best.”

Seems I've found a promising acquaintance.

CHAPTER 131
PREPARATION (2)

The next day.

I gathered people at Gracie's lab.

First, Yuni, responsible for the mana stone.

Then, Ena, who was responsible for creating the staff's shaft.

And Professor Robert, who would merge the mana stone with the staff.

Lastly…

"Hehe…”

"Luna, I'm counting on you."

"No, no! I should be the one saying that!"

It was Luna who would supervise the entire process.

There were several reasons why Luna, not Professor Robert, was overseeing the process.

Firstly, Professor Robert was the only one who could merge the mana stone and the staff.

Secondly, aside from Professor Robert, Luna was the only one around me who had knowledge in this area.

I had considered overseeing it myself, given how busy Luna seemed lately, but Ena mentioned Luna was free, so I asked her for help.

Thankfully, Luna readily agreed.

There was a problem with me taking on the role of the supervisor.

The supervisor was responsible for checking the magic circle's overall design.

If I, the one who designed the circle, supervised, it would lack objectivity.

Knowing Luna would handle this put me at ease.

"Shall we begin then?"

Professor Robert suggested.

Everyone nodded, their gazes fixated on him.

We had gathered today so that as Professor Robert merged the staff and the mana stone, he could receive immediate feedback.

The balance between the mana stone and the staff was critical.

We needed to observe how Robert would blend the two, to determine the staff's balance and effects.

We couldn’t afford multiple trials given our limited resources and time.

It was important to identify and address any issues in this session.

"Let's get started,"

Robert announced.

"Yes,"

Yuni and Ena responded.

Luna, standing beside me, asked,

"What magic circle did you engrave on the mana stone?"

"Oh, I added a circle to increase mana efficiency and effect amplification."

The reason why a staff's effect changed depending on its user was because of the unique magic circles engraved on each staff.

Unlike standard magic circles that had a central main magic symbol, these had a hollow center surrounded by mana circuits.

Once the staff was crafted with this circle, the central area would repeatedly get inscribed and erased.

In essence, any magic that passed through the staff would go through this circle.

A staff acted as a conduit between the mana stone and the wizard using it.

Mana traveled through this conduit, reaching the mana stone, passing through its magic circle, and then being released.

This process could either amplify the magic, hasten its casting, increase its speed, or add various other effects.

"You used a rather ordinary magic circle, didn't you?"

"Yes… It's common, but in a way, it's an uncommon magic circle…"

I responded with a slightly awkward smile to Luna.

The magic circle I engraved, as I had explained to Luna, was designed to enhance the efficiency and effect of magic.

Certainly, there were effects attached even to a common staff.

The issue was the magic I used.

My primary magic was dark magic.

However, dark magic requires precise mana control.

But improving mana efficiency or amplifying its effects, in a way, interfered with the amount of mana needed.

When inscribing dark magic into a magic circle, one would typically select one

particular spell.

Thus, you could manipulate it to accept only the exact amount of mana needed.

But a staff wasn't like that.

You would continuously use different spells and input varying amounts of mana.

Hence, many who used dark magic either had staffs with additional effects or simply didn't use staffs at all.

Even without a staff, the effects of dark magic were definite. If one offered a sacrifice to cast the magic, they could achieve similar effects even without a staff.

Nevertheless, my intention to use a staff was to become as strong as possible.

Soon, I would have to face opponents several times stronger than me.

Those who have lived years longer than me, who have studied magic for a much more extended period.

To defeat such individuals, I needed to be prepared in advance.

Being well-informed about them, devising counter-strategies, and amplifying my magic strength through a staff or sacrificial magic were all essential.

Only then could I hope to overcome them.

Lately, I had been feeling the limits of my efforts.

The difference between talent and hard work.

Some say hard work can never surpass talent.

If someone with talent also works hard, wouldn't they always win?

I agreed with this to some extent, but I didn't think it applied to every battle.

Whether in fights or exams, it all boils down to a single confrontation.

Someone loses, someone wins.

In such confrontations, I believed several factors came into play.

Luck might play a part, as could extensive preparation or possessing more information than others.

Even if someone had superior magical talent, I still stood a chance in a battle.

Seeing my awkward smile, Luna nodded in understanding.

She must have felt it odd for someone using dark magic like me to choose such a staff.

"Let's take a closer look for now."

I decided to observe the situation closer.

Robert inserted a mana stone into the rod that Ena had created.

As he did so, light began to emanate from the mana stone.

It reacted with the mana circuit within the rod.

"Now then,"

Robert nonchalantly began pouring mana into the rod.

Ena and Yuni swallowed nervously.

Even so, it felt odd seeing Yuni so tense, considering she had worked diligently on that mana stone.

But I was the most anxious.

After all, I had designed the magic circle engraved in that mana stone, and I had set up the mana circuit in the staff.

Luna was watching both the mana circuit and the magic circle.

At that moment, Professor Robert spoke to Luna.

"The mana circuit in the staff is blocked. It's not an issue with the intricate parts, look at the main circuit."

"Yes, the mana seems to be cut off at the 3rd circuit,"

Luna quickly checked the staff and informed him.

"The response from the mana stone side is also delayed."

"I've noted that."

"The amount of mana touching the mana stone isn’t consistent."

"Yes…”

…

When the trial run ended, Professor Robert, his face creased in annoyance, turned to me,

"What kind of magic circle design is this?"

Luna jumped in to defend me,

"I mean, the attempt seems innovative, and it does seem to function to some extent…”

"And what good is that? You intend to use this in actual situations?"

Professor Robert held up the damaged mana stone.

"You can't do it this way. The staff is more problematic than the mana stone. The magic circle might be usable in some way, but these staffs? Never."

Professor Robert seemed irritated, but he did mention specific issues.

"How can a staff with such a mana circuit withstand a magic circle where mana flows back and forth? It absolutely can't. If used multiple times, even the mana stone

wouldn't hold up."

The method I used to improve the efficiency of dark magic was somewhat like a calculator.

When using dark magic, if its efficiency increases, the amount of mana to be channeled changes.

Hence, I had to be aware of the fluctuating mana quantity.

Once I used the staff extensively, I'd get a feel for it, but there was an immediate issue.

The method I adopted involved feeding the dark magic into the magic circle of the staff and calculating the necessary amount of mana.

After that, I would properly use the magic.

However, the problem with this method was the reflux of mana.

Typically, the mana circuit in a staff flows in one direction: from the user to the mana stone.

But in this setup, the mana had to flow back to me once.

Of course, I could create a separate return circuit, but designing the circuit in such a way would make the staff too heavy and large to handle, not to mention the cost implications.

That's why I had to rely on a bidirectional circuit.

It wasn't my first time using such a circuit, but configuring it wasn't easy since it's not a commonly used one.

I asked Professor Robert,

"Then how should it be done?"

"How should it be done, indeed,"

Professor Robert mused, looking at me.

“The mana flow through the bidirectional circuit leads to some mana leakage, and the circuit itself is experiencing wear and tear. What should we do about this?”

I was at a loss for words.

“Additionally, the magic circle embedded in the mana stone requires too much calculation. While the idea of calculating the amount of dark magic mana and sending it to you is admirable, the mana stone can’t sustain it.”

Luna suddenly raised her hand.

“Oh, I’ve made a rough note on that part!”

“A note?”

Luna handed a paper filled with extensive notes to Robert.

Though he only glanced at it momentarily, the paper was densely filled with her notes.

Robert looked at Luna with a puzzled expression.

“By making these changes, we might reduce the overload on the mana stone. Of course, we'd still need to use a superior mana stone, but…”

“This will work,”

Robert interjected.

Luna’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Professor Mcguire would certainly be impressed. To think she's my disciple…”

Robert trailed off midway.

I couldn’t believe my ears.

“Disciple? Did you just call her your disciple?”

“No.”

“You did say it.”

“I did not.”

With that, Robert threw a broken staff in my direction.

“Focus on this instead of dwelling on inconsequential things.”

"I've been managing quite well."

I responded.

With a sigh, Robert said,

“Then pay attention to what's happening around you.”

“Around me?”

I looked at Robert, puzzled.

Robert briefly glanced at Luna beside me and then turned away.

I recalled hearing similar advice back in the North.

Astina too had told me to be more aware of my surroundings.

Hearing the same piece of advice from different people made me even more curious.

What did they mean by that?

“Regardless, reflect on your overconfidence in thinking that a single practice session would be enough.”

“Yes, understood…”

I had many questions, but I decided to focus on the task at hand.

I didn’t know when the Rebel Leader would make a move, but time was of the

essence.

“Luna, shall we head out…”

As I turned to Luna, I noticed her face was flushed, her eyes fixed on Robert in surprise.

“Luna?”

“Uh, uh, yes??”

She exclaimed, startled by my voice.

“What's wrong?”

“N-nothing! Well, shall we go over what happened?”

I nodded in agreement, following Luna's lead.

CHAPTER 132
PREPARATION (3)

Pay attention to the people around you.

It's easier said than done.

How can one possibly know every thought between individuals?

One person might hide their feelings, while the other might not be perceptive.

So no matter how much you pay attention, the information you can grasp is limited.

"Rudy?"

But when someone says this to me, especially those I've been with for a long time, it means they've seen something I haven't.

Paying attention means noticing things.

Things I never considered before.

What could that be?

I always thought I was quite observant.

But were there things I missed?

"Rudy!"

"Huh?"

Suddenly, I saw Luna standing before me.

"Rudy, are you okay?"

"Oh, yeah…”

I nodded in response to Luna's question.

"If you're not feeling well, should we continue this later? You seem distracted."

"No, let's keep going. I'll focus. Sorry."

Luna looked intently at me, then turned her gaze to Ena and Yuni sitting in front of us.

"Let's stop here for today. Just check the parts I mentioned. Let me know if you need anything else."

"Huh? Now… Wait!"

As Yuni tried to argue with Luna's statement, Ena covered her mouth.

"Alright! We can do it later. We should get going."

"Uh…?"

I stared at Ena as she abruptly left the room.

Watching her leave, I shifted my gaze to Luna.

"Uh, yes?"

When I stared intently at Luna, she looked away, seemingly flustered.

I broke the silence.

"Luna, shall we go for a walk?"

Luna said, slightly pushing her hair behind her ear.

While listening to her, my mind wandered to another thought.

People around me.

The ones I consider close are only people like Luna, Rie, and Astina, who have been with me from the beginning.

Of course, there were a few people I got to know recently through student council activities, but Astina knows nothing about them.

Also, the ones Robert recognizes as my acquaintances are limited to just a few.

I recalled the situation earlier.

The moment when Robert spoke to me while looking at Luna.

Did his gaze on Luna mean something?

I turned my head and looked at Luna.

Luna, holding a book delicately in her hands, looked back as if asking what was on my mind.

I saw Luna in detail.

The timid Luna, always giving her best in everything she did.

Beyond that image of Luna, I saw her - just as she is.

Brown hair, flawless skin.

A naive face with a gentle smile.

Her feminine grace was evident.

Details I noticed when we first met, but overlooked as we grew close, were now clear to me.

"Luna."

I spoke softly.

"What's your ideal type of person?"

“…Huh?"

My question was filled with more than just pure curiosity.

The conclusion I'd reached.

This conclusion might just be my misunderstanding.

I might have jumped to a bizarre deduction.

But I was merely entertaining the thought.

Remarks from Astina and Robert.

The peculiar behavior of Ena and Riku.

I considered it just an ordinary speculation any man might have.

'Could she like me?'

Isn't such a thought normal?

It might have been an excuse or truly my genuine feelings.

Confronted by my sudden question, Luna pondered deeply.

"Um, ideal type is…”

Seeing her think so earnestly, I began to feel a bit embarrassed.

Was I too arrogant?

Hadn't Robert just pointed out my arrogant behavior earlier?

I wondered if my question was too presumptuous.

Then Luna softly spoke,

"Someone kind… who only looks at me… and is admirable when it matters?"

I let out an awkward laugh at her words.

"Is that so… Pretty ordinary, huh?"

While responding, I wondered if I fit her description.

If asked if I've lived kindly, I'd say I was average.

Currently, I was plotting against Professor Gracie and scheming to use others, hardly the deeds of a kind person.

However, I always tried to save people, so maybe I was a bit kind.

Next, someone who looks only at her.

I never lived life fixated on someone else.

If I were to focus on just one person, it would be myself.

After all, every incident I've caused was an act to ensure my own survival.

Moreover, being kind and loyal is a universally desired trait.

But 'someone who is admirable when it matters' isn't that common.

I had something to say about that.

Nevertheless, didn't I show up when it mattered?

But… that very assertion had its issues.

To get a clearer picture, I posed another question.

"Then, at the academy… who comes closest to your ideal?"

"Huh?"

I barely held back an embarrassed grin.

It was an odd question, the type you'd ask just before confessing feelings.

Luna's face began to turn red, seemingly understanding the implication of my question.

Luna and I turned our heads away from each other.

Why did I say that?

What if this makes things awkward between Luna and me?

Whether Luna liked me or not, it was a problem either way.

I tilted my head, feeling dejected.

Recently, my mind's been flooded with so many thoughts that I asked without thinking.

But after saying it, I immediately regretted it.

I sneakily glanced at Luna.

She turned away, her ears slightly red.

Seeing her ears, I could guess the shade of her face.

"Um… well…”

Luna hesitated, probably wondering how to respond.

It felt like a Pandora's box that shouldn't be opened.

Nevertheless, I stared intently at Luna.

Slowly, Luna began to lift her head and looked up at me.

Her cheeks were pleasantly flushed.

"In the academy… my ideal type is… probably… Rudy."

She said.

Silence.

The world seemed to stop.

No.

Everything around me seemed frozen, but my heart raced incredibly fast.

What just happened…

It was a feeling I'd never experienced before, a whirlwind of emotions.

"Ah… I see… uh…”

Dumbfounded, I just stared at Luna, unsure of what to say.

Seeing my silence, Luna, flustered, began to wave her hands.

"Rudy as my ideal… type? Uh… How should I put this… It's not that I dislike Rudy, but… um…?"

However, her reaction only confirmed my beliefs.

All the actions Luna had taken up till now started to make sense, fitting together like pieces of a puzzle.

I pondered.

What should I do now?

I questioned myself.

Do I like Luna?

I had never considered the idea of dating those around me.

I hadn’t even imagined it.

I was always preoccupied with the thought of survival.

A situation where one misstep could lead me off a cliff.

Of course, I sought fleeting pleasures, but I never aimed for true happiness.

If I could just survive, I thought that was enough…

"Luna."

At my words, Luna jolted, startled.

“Ah… um…”

Luna hid slightly behind her book, her face turning red.

To anyone's eyes, she was an adorable girl.

No man could possibly resist her.

But that very fact made it impossible for me to speak.

I couldn't tell her that I liked her.

So many events awaited me.

The risk of losing my life, of everything collapsing around me.

I couldn’t promise her everything.

Also, I needed time to think.

I couldn't answer Luna based on a fleeting emotion.

I couldn't pursue a relationship with her here.

Not just because of Luna as a woman, but because I valued Luna as a person too dearly.

I carefully began,

“Can we revisit this conversation later, much later?”

“Later?”

Luna looked straight at me, hiding her lips behind the book.

“Yes, later. Can you wait until then?”

For a moment, Luna stared blankly, then her face flushed deeply as she nodded.

“I’d, I’d like it if our talk then could be more… positive…”

“Oh, oh… Yes, yes…”

Her words took me by surprise.

It was surprising to hear Luna say something like that.

“Well, then… later!”

With that, Luna started to run off.

I watched her retreating figure.

Luna sprinted ahead.

She ran without a clear destination in mind.

"Ugh… ah…”

She'd said it.

Luna felt a mix of embarrassment and shame.

How could she have so openly implied that her ideal type was Rudy?

And then even mention Rudy’s name after that?

It wasn't the feminine charm that Ena had talked about that she had shown, but rather a foolishness that made her cheeks burn with embarrassment.

"Ah, but…"

Luna began to slow down until she eventually stopped.

She squatted down on the spot and covered her face.

"Ughh…"

Luna let out a strange sound, neither crying nor laughing.

Surely, surely, surely Rudy had recognized her feelings.

If he hadn't, he'd be a fool, an idiot, a total blockhead.

But Rudy wasn't at that level.

The fact he had suggested discussing it again later made it clear he had noticed.

But, more than that, Luna had a question.

How did he suddenly find out about her feelings?

However, what Luna had overlooked was:

The only one who hadn't noticed Luna's feelings was Rudy.

She had made it too obvious, anyone observing for a short while could tell.

Given that Rudy had received hints from others, it was only natural he'd figure it out.

Luna, of course, had no knowledge of this.

Most who knew the situation didn't tell Luna.

Only Ena had told Luna directly.

Ena claimed to be a love expert, so Luna assumed Ena was just perceptive enough to

have caught on.

Pushing all these stray thoughts aside, Luna focused on one thing.

"When, when will it be…”

Could she expect a positive response?

Or, was it right to even have this conversation now?

These thoughts danced back and forth in Luna’s mind.

CHAPTER 133
SAINT HARUNA (1)

"Ah, you've arrived."

A chubby priest rushed out and greeted with a bow.

"I am Pheron, the Head Priest. It's a pleasure… Whew…"

"Hello. I am Astina Persia."

The priest, having introduced himself as Pheron, caught his breath and looked at Astina.

Astina Persia.

Her fame was widely recognized throughout the empire.

The position of Head Priest held some prominence and power.

However, one couldn't act recklessly before such talent who bore the name of the Persia family.

Even now, despite her young age, she held both power and fame.

It was unpredictable how influential she would become in the future.

Thus, making a good impression was essential.

"It seems this is my first visit since becoming the heir. I had always intended to visit at least once; apologies for the delay."

"Hehe… No need for apologies. Given your busy schedule, we are just grateful for your visit."

This was a temple located in the Persia territory.

A temple dedicated to the deity, Karua.

In the empire, they worshipped only one god.

The deity believed to oversee and create the world, Karua, was revered, while other gods were deemed heretical.

Of course, this didn't mean those worshipping other deities faced persecution.

It was just the general belief.

One of the reasons for this was the relatively weak influence of religion within the empire.

The empire relied on the power of magic.

They revered the tangible and boundless power of magic, not relying on something like religion.

Therefore, even if the temple of Karua deemed others as heretical, there wasn’t much they could do.

"Shall we proceed inside?"

Pheron gestured towards the temple as he spoke to Astina.

Astina looked at him and smiled.

'Hmm, was it good that I came out?'

Pheron, seeing Astina's smile, breathed an inward sigh of relief.

Astina's reputation was lofty, but she was still young and had only recently become the heir.

Before receiving her inheritance, she hadn’t been in the spotlight much.

The Head Priest had personally come out, hoping that this kind gesture would favorably influence her perception of the temple.

However, contrary to Pheron's expectations, Astina was quite displeased.

When you observe someone long enough, even in silence, their true nature becomes evident.

Someone who flatters the strong and is deceitful.

He seemed like a corrupt priest.

Of course, having already researched this Head Priest, she might have been biased.

Still, Astina did not show her discomfort.

After all, her current visit wasn't to confront this man.

Normally, temples were affiliated with the central temple in the empire.

However, temples located in territories were, in effect, no different from businesses under the territories.

As the acting lord, Astina could easily deal with these people with a flick of her wrist.

She didn’t want to show displeasure from the start and give them an opportunity to respond.

Astina followed the high priest Pheron into the temple.

The inside of the temple was adorned with lavish decorations.

Huge windows stood out, and the ornaments on the ceiling made one wonder how they were installed.

Astina exclaimed in admiration as she observed the interior.

This exclamation was not because the inside was beautiful, but because she could imagine how much money was poured into it.

'It seems they've really splurged.'

The power of the temples might be waning now, but during times when magic hadn’t

advanced, their power was immense.

Even now, they were living off the wealth amassed during those times.

However, they couldn't foresee the future even with all this wealth.

Even during the rise of magic, they were just busy taking money from their believers, and this behavior continued until now.

They were soon left behind.

People began to praise magic, not the gods.

They tried to catch people's attention with their lavish buildings, but the masses weren't swayed by mere appearances.

As a result, temples held a lower position within the empire.

There wasn’t anything a temple without any special power like magic could do.

"The architecture is beautiful."

Astina praised it without mentioning these thoughts.

"Hehe, isn’t this what one must do to house our God?"

Pheron responded with a pleased smile.

"Now, shall we go in?"

Pheron led Astina to a reception room inside the temple.

The interior of the reception room was even more luxurious than what typical nobles used.

But by now, nothing could surprise her.

Why would priests need such a luxurious reception room for entertaining guests?

Astina, tired of such thoughts, just let it go.

"Over there, bring some tea. Since Lady Astina is here, it must be made well. Hehe…"

"Yes, understood."

Pheron jokingly said to the nearby priest.

As soon as the priest left, Pheron turned to Astina.

"Hehe, lately, Lady Astina's reputation is so great that it's all I hear about."

He immediately started to butter up to Astina.

"Enough of that."

Astina waved her hand dismissively.

"I'd like to get straight to the point."

"…The point?"

Pheron's eyes widened at Astina's words.

He had heard that Astina was coming, but he hadn't heard why.

He had assumed she was just checking the temple's status, so he hadn't given it much thought.

However, when she mentioned getting to the point, Pheron's expression hardened.

'What is she talking about? There have been rumors lately about increasing taxes… Could this be related to that?'

The political climate was chaotic lately due to various issues with the rebels.

As a result, most territories increased their tax rates.

Amidst this, the temple's situation began to become more challenging.

Originally, temples benefited from tax exemption and didn't need to pay any taxes.

However, recent laws began to impose some taxes on temples.

This has become a significant concern for the temple.

'We absolutely cannot pay these taxes…!'

Pheron shouted internally.

The donations which were already dwindling, if it was taken away by the territory, he would have even less money.

Pheron had no intention of sitting by and watching this happen.

But, as someone who has been in the clergy for a long time, he quickly regained his composure and smiled again.

"If you're talking about the main issue…"

Pheron pretended to be oblivious.

It wouldn't be beneficial to bring up the tax issue first.

Nevertheless, being a clergyman, he tried his best to hide his worldly concerns.

Astina, noticing Pheron's behavior, crossed her legs and said,

"I want to know about the Saint."

"The… Saint?"

Pheron looked baffled by Astina's question.

It was completely unexpected.

"Why are you suddenly asking about the Saint…?"

"Oh, just personal curiosity. Is it difficult to share?"

Pheron pondered for a moment, then smiled and shook his head.

"Heh, what secrets could there be between you and me?"

At that, Astina's expression slightly soured.

'What does he think our relationship is?'

However, she quickly changed her expression and moved on.

"I've been reading the empire's history and the holy scriptures of Karua."

"Oh, you're interested in theology?"

To Pheron's question, Astina nodded.

"You could say that."

"So, what about the Saint…?"

Astina grinned as she began to speak.

"In the historical records, it's said that the Saint is a being from another dimension."

“…Dimension?"

"Yes, they say that God created not just our world but multiple worlds…”

"Ah…”

"…?"

At Astina's words, Pheron burst into laughter.

"Hahaha! Dimensions? What are you talking about! Hahaha… The Saint coming from another dimension? Lady Astina, you're so naive!"

Astina's expression darkened at his words.

“What are you talking about?”

Pheron laughed heartily, patting his large belly.

"The Saint is from our empire. She's not an entity from some other place!"

“…What about the first Saint?”

“I wasn’t alive during the early days of the empire, but as far as I know, she was just a regular citizen of the empire. Moreover, she was a commoner…”

Astina narrowed her eyes.

"How can you be so sure?"

“I’ve had many conversations with the Saint, Haruna. Being the head priest of a significant territory, I had many chances to speak with her. Through these, I was able to gather more information about her.”

Pheron continued,

“However, there was nothing unusual about her. Her background was clear, and there was no indication that she came from another dimension or any peculiar place. The same was true for the previous Saint.”

Astina rubbed her chin and replied,

“From what I've heard, she has this peculiar ability to see the future?”

Pheron shook his head at Astina’s comment.

“Do you truly believe that the Saint can foresee the future?”

Astina didn’t reply.

Many know and have experienced that the Saint isn't always accurate in her predictions.

In the past, there were many instances where the areas the Saint deemed dangerous experienced no issues at all.

While similar events have occurred, there was never a time when an exact prediction came to fruition.

Most of her prophecies were vague, hinting at outcomes without clear details.

‘However, based on what Rudy said… ’

She recalled a conversation she had with Rudy in the North.

Rudy mentioned that he avoided danger during the Winter Ball based on the information she provided.

He overcame danger based on the future the Saint mentioned…

‘Just who is this Saint, really?’

“Heh, still, it's refreshing to see your innocent side, Lady Astina. It feels like a return to simpler times."

Astina shot a glare at the slightly teasing Pheron.

"Is it alright for us to discuss this?"

“It’s alright. Those who need to know, already know. Besides, while the Saint is technically affiliated with the temple, she is somewhat separate from it."

"Separate, you say?"

Pheron chuckled, rubbing his hands together.

“The one to appoint the next Saint is the previous Saint. As to how and why the role is passed on, even we aren’t quite sure. But it’s always handed down by the previous Saint.”

“Hmm…”

Astina rubbed her nose, deep in thought.

She came seeking information about the Saint, but ended up with more questions than answers.

Then, she remembered something Pheron said earlier.

“Didn’t you say earlier that the background of the Saints are clear?”

“Yes, that's right. We know exactly where they come from and who their parents are.”

Astina smirked.

“Then, can I meet the current Saint's parents?”

-Hello, are you Haruna? I came to see you.

-Have you ever considered becoming the Saint? It would be a good opportunity for you.

-You want to become the Saint? Great choice!

-This is the essential knowledge you need to become the Saint.

-The essential… 'magic' the Saint must learn.

“Ugh…”

Haruna held her head as she sat up in bed.

After getting up, Haruna sat still for a moment and sighed.

“It's been a while since I had that dream…”

It was about the time she inherited the role of the Saint.

Haruna looked at the blindfold placed beside her.

“Sigh…”

Picking up the blindfold, she let out another sigh.

“It's about time to leave.”

She got out of bed and stretched.

“Ugh!”

Then, she pulled back the curtain to look outside.

“Ah, what lovely weather!”

She commented, admiring the sunlit, vibrant trees.

CHAPTER 134
SAINT HARUNA (2)

Student Council Room.

I was going over some documents when I heard Rie's words and looked up.

"The Saint is coming?"

Rie casually shrugged her shoulders.

It was roughly four days before Homecoming Day.

We still had some time.

"Why is she coming so early?"

"Who knows? But remember, she came early last time too."

"That's true, but…"

While Rie might have a point, I couldn't help but be concerned.

I recalled the letter that Astina sent not long ago.

She mentioned researching dimensions and was asking about the Saint.

However, she hadn't found anything significant yet.

I found it curious.

I'd never heard of a relation between the Saint and other dimensions, not during my studies at the academy, at least.

For now, I knew Rie was also looking into the Saint, but progress seemed slow.

Speaking of which, Astina did mention something for Rie.

"Astina won't be attending Homecoming Day, will she?"

"Really? Hmm…"

Rie appeared lost in thought, probably pondering over the Saint again.

I knew it wouldn't yield an answer, so I subtly changed the topic.

"Anyway, have all the supplies come in as expected?"

Taken aback by the sudden question, Rie hesitated.

"Uh, well, I believe Kuhn and Locke are handling that."

"That's good to hear."

I smiled, feeling that our Homecoming Day preparations were on track.

Through this process, my admiration for Astina grew immensely.

How did she manage to shoulder so many responsibilities on her own?

Even with my best efforts, I felt short on time.

Fortunately, with Rie helping with the council duties, we seemed to be keeping up.

Rie smiled briefly, then looked around and spoke,

"Speaking of which, why haven't we seen Luna lately?"

"Huh?"

I was taken aback by the mention of Luna's name.

At my reaction, Rie narrowed her eyes, staring intently at me.

"…What did you do?"

"What do you mean 'what did I do'?"

Well, I did do something…

I hadn't spoken privately with Luna for a while now.

We did meet occasionally as a group for council-related matters but hadn't spoken privately.

After the incident, I'm unsure how to face Luna.

Even though I promised her an answer, I still hadn't settled on one.

With so many pressing matters, including the rebel issue and Homecoming Day preparations, I decided to address our personal matters later.

As I sank into my thoughts, Rie finally said,

"If you have worries, I can lend an ear, you know…"

"Huh?"

Rie blushed slightly, turning her head away in apparent shyness.

"I… I might be able to help, you know."

I looked at Rie strangely, then chuckled awkwardly.

"Haha… No, it's just something I need to think about on my own."

At that, Rie shot me a sharp glance.

"Don't mope around then. You look like a puppy that's been scolded by its owner, especially when we're so busy."

Why is she acting like this?

I stared intently at Rie, trying to understand her sudden change in mood.

Is she on edge because of all the work lately?

But considering that, Rie seemed to be in great spirits.

“Anyway, everything is being handled well, right?”

I said casually to Rie.

Rie relaxed her furrowed brows and sighed.

“Yes, things are under control now.”

"I'm going to pop by the lab for a bit,"

I said.

I heard that recently, Luna was learning about staff synthesis from Professor Robert.

It was a technique for fusing the staff's shaft with a mana stone – a complex skill known to be quite challenging.

But during our last practice session, it seemed Professor Robert took a liking to Luna and decided to pass on this knowledge to her.

"Alright, take care,"

Rie replied with a faint smile.

I left the student council room, and as I did, a familiar face came into view.

A girl was hesitating outside the student council room.

It was Yuni.

"Why are you here?"

I asked, slightly surprised.

"Oh, senior,"

Yuni, whom I expected to be in the lab, said, clearly caught off guard by my presence.

"I… um…”

She seemed embarrassed, avoiding my gaze and acting quite awkwardly.

Did she eat something odd today?

This doesn't seem like the Yuni I know.

I looked at her, puzzled.

“Is it me you're here to see?”

Yuni shook her head.

“I could've easily met you at the lab.”

Right.

"Is it Luna, then? She's not here right now."

Considering Luna has been involved in manastone-related tasks recently, maybe she came looking for her.

It would make sense; Yuni might still feel awkward around Luna.

But the name she mentioned was unexpected.

"Ah… I came to see my sister,"

She said, referring to Rie.

This puzzled me further.

Why would she act so shy about meeting Rie?

Their last conversation didn’t seem awkward.

Filled with questions but deciding not to press further, I moved to open the student council room's door for her.

"Then, I'll let you in…”

"W-wait!"

Yuni quickly intercepted, stopping me from opening the door.

Holding onto my wrist, she looked up at me with an earnest expression.

"Wait a moment…”

Every time I met with Rie, they usually just chatted casually with a bit of teasing.

I was curious as to why she was acting this way.

"Um, senior… can I ask you something?"

"Hm?"

Yuni fiddled with her nails before speaking.

"I heard… there's a bakery… my sister likes…”

"Oh, that place? It's the bakery right next to the academy when you go out."

"Wow!"

Yuni's face lit up at my answer.

"Thank you. I'll buy you something nice later!"

She smiled warmly at me.

Did I say something that impressive?

Still, seeing her cheerful made me feel good too.

"So, you're heading to the lab after finishing up here?"

"Yes, I'll be there shortly."

With that, Yuni and I said our goodbyes, and I moved on.

However, I shouldn’t have headed to the lab.

I should have just gone to the student council room with Yuni.

And… I should've just stayed put.

I began walking towards the lab.

"I need to handle… some staff-related stuff… and then…”

"Ah… Ah…”

Suddenly, I heard strange noises coming from inside the lab.

"Hm?"

Who could it be?

I looked at the lab door, puzzled.

I had just met Yuni, and I knew that Kuhn and Locke were organizing things.

Emily should definitely be there too.

Then, why were there voices from the lab?

I leaned in closer to the lab door, listening intently.

"What on earth… is this…”

A woman's voice.

It sounded familiar, but…

Someone I know?

It would be incredibly rude for someone I know to enter the lab without permission.

The lab had valuable research, and there were many things someone might want to steal.

Of course, leaving the lab unlocked was a mistake Yuni and I often made.

But still, it's not polite.

But why does the voice sound familiar?

Regardless, I decided to open the lab door and enter.

"Who is…”

Upon entering, I immediately recognized the person.

Gracie Lifegold.

Professor Gracie had returned from her vacation.

"Ah…”

Seeing Professor Gracie's face, my expression stiffened.

I was sure Professor Gracie was scheduled to return on homecoming day.

Why so soon…

However, before I could think further, my body reacted on its own.

I have to run.

I've started too many experiments.

My plan was to get some results before Gracie returned and greet her with some good news.

But, the results weren't out yet.

The research was still ongoing.

"Sigh."

I need to escape.

Clearly, she had just returned to the academy.

Yuni was in the student council room earlier, and she hadn’t mentioned Professor Gracie’s return.

That was clear enough.

Human anger, at first, flares up like a flame.

However, given a bit of time, that anger fades.

There's a saying that if one can endure thrice, even murder can be forgiven.

Perhaps this is similar.

I believed it was right to give Professor Gracie some time to think.

Quickly, I tried to move and escape from the room.

But this escape wasn't for my sake.

It was for Professor Gracie to have time to think…

"Arrange Room."

Without even glancing at me, Gracie cast a spell.

BANG!

Immediately, the door shut, the scattered documents around the room neatly arranged themselves, the windows closed, and the curtains were drawn.

The room became dark in an instant.

"…”

I was trapped in the room before I could even attempt to leave.

"Rudy?"

Gracie looked at me with a smiling face.

However, it wasn't a kind smile.

It was filled with intensity and hostility.

"What might this be?"

Picking up one of the neatly arranged documents with her magic, Gracie waved it at me.

I tried to respond swiftly.

"It seems like Yuni has been studying something like this lately,"

I said, forcing an awkward smile.

It was a feeble excuse.

"Really?"

Gracie then picked up another document from the side.

It was an official document granting permission for our research at the academy.

“…What is this?"

I stared intently at the document, scratching my head.

"I'm not sure? What document is that?"

"…”

Gracie gazed at me sharply.

The surroundings began to tremble slightly.

It was due to Gracie's mana moving intensely, affecting everything around.

Gracie lowered her head slightly, her shoulders shaking.

After a brief moment, she suddenly raised her head, exclaiming,

"You damn fool!!!!!!!!!!!!"

“What do you think?”

There was a sudden noise, reminiscent of the movement of armor joints.

"Not bad."

Aryandor, the leader of The Rebels, said with a smile.

He was adjusting the prosthetic attached to his leg.

"While it may not move like before, you should be satisfied. It's the best prosthetic made with the current magical technology we have."

Remarked the black-haired man in front of him, adjusting his glasses.

"Thank you, Raven."

Aryandor expressed his gratitude, then rose from his seat to test the mobility of his new leg.

After a few steps around the room, a grin appeared on his face.

"Seems decent enough."

“However, are you sure you should be moving around so soon? Perhaps it’s best to wait until you’ve fully adjusted,"

Raven advised.

“Why worry? Despite his injuries, he’s still our leader,”

Jefrin interjected, sucking on a candy.

Raven cast a disdainful glance at her.

“You might look younger, but your behavior sure hasn't matured.”

"What can I do? The mind naturally follows the body. Don’t you know that? This is why I can't stand magic technicians. Tsk."

Jefrin responded with an annoyed tone, and Raven, not wanting to prolong their argument, busied himself tidying up.

Aryandor picked up his sword from its resting place.

“Jefrin, are the others ready?”

“Yep, yep. They’re all waiting,”

Jefrin responded, removing the candy from her mouth with an exaggerated nod.

Aryandor sheathed his sword and declared,

"Then, let’s get going."

As Aryandor stepped out of the building, he was greeted by a massive bone dragon and a group of individuals.

A woman wearing a wide-brimmed hat and holding a broomstick.

A muscular man with numerous scars on his face and body, a greatsword strapped to his back.

Another man with pronounced dark circles under his eyes and disheveled hair.

Each of them had a unique presence.

“Everything's prepared as instructed,” said the man with the dark circles, standing next to the bone dragon.

Aryandor nodded in response.

“Then, let’s set off.”

The bone dragon lowered its head, allowing Aryandor easy access to mount it.

He climbed up, and the others quickly followed suit.

Raven, watching them depart, voiced his concern,

“Travel safely.”

Aryandor glanced back momentarily before stating,

“We’re heading to Liberion Academy.”

CHAPTER 135
SAINT HARUNA (3)

“Didn’t you get scolded by Professor Gracie yesterday?”

Rie, while carelessly stuffing documents into her bag, spoke to me.

I let out a sigh, thinking about it.

“I now understand what they mean when they say it’s terrifying when someone who’s usually silent gets angry.”

Indeed, yesterday I was reprimanded by Professor Gracie.

It was somewhat expected.

The research I’m currently working on nearly exhausted all of the lab funding.

Of course, when we first signed the contract, she did say I could pursue a project of my choosing.

But even by my standards, it felt like I might’ve spent a tad too much.

But what could I do now?

The money had already been spent…

“Alright, I better get going.”

“So soon?”

Rie had only just arrived, not even ten minutes ago.

I was surprised she was leaving already.

Seeing my reaction, Rie chuckled,

“Yuni invited me for some tea today.”

I remembered Yuni asking me about it yesterday.

Judging by Yuni's attitude, it didn’t seem like there was any malicious intent behind the invitation.

So, it should be fine.

I shrugged,

“Alright, take care.”

As I waved goodbye with a smile, Rie advised in a playful tone,

“Try not to work too hard.”

With those words, she left.

That cheeky concern of hers made me smile.

I began to sift through the documents Rie left behind.

All the paperwork related to Homecoming Day seemed to be in order, but I was double-checking just to be certain.

As I was going through the documents, there was a knock on the student council office door.

I looked up, perplexed.

Who would visit at this time?

Everyone mentioned being busy, so I assumed it might be just another student.

“Who is it?”

A voice replied,

“It’s Haruna.”

Haru… na?

My eyes widened in surprise.

“Yes?”

My surprised reaction led to the door opening and a woman stepping in.

She wore nun’s robes and had a rosary around her neck.

However, something about her was different from the last time I saw her.

“The blindfold…”

The last time I saw her, she was wearing a blindfold, as if she were blind.

But now, she entered the student council office confidently, without it.

I had already heard from Rie that she wasn’t actually blind, but seeing her so boldly walk in caught me off guard.

“Hello, Rudy Astria.”

She greeted with a smile.

I stood up from my seat, still in shock, looking at her,

“What brings you here?”

I could understand her being in the academy, but her sudden visit to the student council office left me bewildered.

As I posed the question, she responded with a kind face,

“Rudy Astria, I came to meet you.”

“…Me?”

I hadn't completely ruled out the possibility of the Saint coming here.

After all, if you visit the student council office, you'd naturally meet the student council president.

However, the real question was why she had come to see me.

It would have made sense if she was here to meet the principal or some other professors.

They are the representatives of the academy, so it would be natural to exchange greetings.

But, the fact that she chose to meet me before them was puzzling.

Then, the Saint stated calmly,

“The rebels are coming.”

I widened my eyes in shock.

Only a few people, including Cromwell and myself, knew the rebels were on their way to meet me.

Yet hearing such words from her lips was utterly baffling.

I fixed a stern look on her and asked,

"How do you know this? Why would the Rebels suddenly come to the academy……?"

“There's no time for idle chatter.”

“Excuse me?”

She pointed to the clock.

“Within an hour, the rebels will be here.”

I frowned at her unexpected statement.

"How do you know this?"

She replied, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world,

“Because I can see the future.”

Gently caressing the rosary around her neck, she quietly added,

“I need your help, Possessor.”

Cromwell was in the principal's office, handling paperwork.

Juggling the duties of both the vice principal and the principal left him with no room for relaxation.

Of course, it wasn't all paperwork.

It was important to keep things running smoothly at the Academy.

Currently, Principal McDowell was absent.

It wasn't a brief absence; he had suffered a severe injury and was under treatment.

To keep this situation under wraps, it was essential that academy operations appeared seamless.

If word got out about McDowell's precarious condition, there would surely be complications.

After all, the previous incident orchestrated by Vice Principal Oliver happened because Principal McDowell had been away for an extended period.

Cromwell sighed.

Moreover, there were other matters mentioned by Rudy that needed addressing.

While he had requested assistance from central authorities regarding this issue, it was hard to expect much without an exact date.

Having top talents linger for too long in the academy could, in some respects, be seen

as a waste of resources.

So, Cromwell believed that it was important to prepare as much as possible using the academy's current resources.

He had reached out in advance to trustworthy professors like Mcguire and Robert to ensure heightened security at the academy and requested an early return from Professor Gracie.

He had prepared as best he could.

While Cromwell was reviewing documents, an assistant came from behind with a cup of coffee.

"Vice Principal, perhaps you should take a break and have some coffee."

This assistant originally worked for McDowell, but since McDowell was absent, he was assisting Cromwell.

"Ah, thank you."

Smiling, Cromwell extended his hand to receive the coffee from the assistant.

Just as he was about to grip the cup:

"Ah!"

Clang…!

Cromwell fumbled, dropping the coffee cup, his mouth agape in surprise.

"Oh, Vice Principal, are you alright?"

The assistant was visibly startled.

While the coffee cup shattered on the floor, thankfully, no one was scalded.

As the assistant was about to clean the broken shards,

"I'll take care of it…"

Cromwell stopped him.

The assistant looked at Cromwell with a confused expression.

Suddenly, Cromwell's expression turned icy cold.

"Immediately tell Professor Gracie to come up to the rooftop. And notify Robert and Mcguire."

"Wha…?"

The assistant tilted his head, puzzled by Cromwell's abrupt order.

"Go. Now."

Then, Cromwell got up, opened the window of the principal's office, and said,

“Tell the professors that if I act strangely, they'll understand. For Professor Gracie…”

Cromwell pointed upwards.

"The highest point of the academy building. Tell her to go there."

Suddenly, using magic, Cromwell soared into the sky from the window.

"What is happening…?”

The assistant was baffled by Cromwell's sudden action, but he took off to carry out the instructions.

The sky was bathed in the glow of the setting sun.

Darkness began to encroach upon the surroundings.

Right under that sky stood Cromwell.

On the highest spire of the academy.

"These damned fools."

Cromwell spat out a curse.

From the distance.

Madmen were approaching.

The Rebels.

It wasn't just one or two rebels.

Several rebels emitting a massive amount of mana were coming.

The mana emanating from each one of them was formidable.

They all looked like top-ranking members within the Rebels.

However, amidst them, one mana fluctuation stood out the most.

A presence that was overwhelmingly greater than the ones next to him.

He was likely their leader.

He had supposedly been injured, but judging by the mana he exuded, he was a genuine monster.

However, they were not yet visible.

Thanks to the detection magic previously set up by Professor Mcguire, Cromwell was aware of their approach.

Still, even without that detection magic, he would have known.

They did not hide their mana.

They openly showed their approach.

Almost as if challenging anyone to stop them.

Cromwell gazed at the horizon, where the sky met the land.

Although they weren't yet visible, it was clear they were flying towards him.

Suddenly, from below, a woman awkwardly flying up was seen.

"Gracie, you've arrived."

Professor Gracie, not skilled in using telekinesis, couldn't fly as naturally as Cromwell.

But she managed to float up to where Cromwell was.

Upon reaching the adjacent spire, she landed and looked at Cromwell.

"Professor… What on earth is happening…?"

Cromwell glanced down from the sky.

The academy was becoming increasingly chaotic.

The students seemed to be evacuating, moving hastily.

Professor Mcguire must be handling the situation well.

Cromwell then turned his gaze back to Gracie.

"Gracie, can you feel that?"

At Cromwell's words, Gracie, with a puzzled face, looked in the direction Cromwell pointed.

"I… I don't understand."

Gracie responded with confusion.

There was nothing visibly there.

Cromwell then frowned and lightly smacked Gracie.

"Ouch!"

"Don't use your eyes. Sense with your mana."

"Ah, okay…"

Gracie focused and sensed in the direction Cromwell indicated.

Her eyes widened in shock.

Feeling the storm-like surge of mana overwhelmed her.

"What is this…"

"The Rebels. They're coming."

At Cromwell's words, Gracie gasped.

"So what should we do now…?"

"Given how they are approaching, asking for reinforcements would be pointless. I did send a distress signal, but for now, we need to handle this ourselves."

"Should we all run away then…"

"Do you think that makes sense? It's right for the students to flee, but why would a professor need to run?"

"…They look too strong."

At Gracie's words, Cromwell sighed…

"Still, we must try to fight."

Cromwell descended from the sky and landed on the spire where Gracie was perched.

"There's something you need to do first."

"What is it?"

Cromwell pointed again towards the rebels.

“Intercept those guys.”

“Intercept? They're moving extremely fast though…?”

Gracie looked at Cromwell with disbelief.

"Stop being so dramatic."

Cromwell remarked with a chuckle.

"You can do it. After all, whose student are you?"

Hearing this, the gloom on Gracie’s face began to lift.

Hitting targets moving at that speed was a difficult task.

Yet, the mentor she knew since the days she was ignorant of magic had told her so.

His casual confidence bolstered her own.

Even though she had learned something else instead of mastering her mentor's techniques, the fact that Cromwell acknowledged her brought a mix of joy and pride.

“I’ll… I’ll give it a shot.”

Gracie clenched her fists and looked up to the sky.

“Whew…”

Sparks began to sizzle around Gracie.

“Descent of the Lightning God…”

A powerful electricity started to radiate around her.

Gracie's hair started to turn white, and her eyes shifted to a bright blue hue.

The fragile girl she once appeared to be was no longer in sight.

Gracie took aim at where the rebels were.

“But, even if I hit the rebels, I don’t know where they'll fall."

“Don't worry about that. I'll handle it.”

Gracie nodded, reaching out with her hand as Cromwell soared back into the sky.

Gracie closed her eyes, focusing intently.

She aimed precisely at her target, accounting for the speed of the enemy, the location they would reach at that speed, the time it would take her to cast her spell, and where they could dodge to.

She made no room for error.

Once she finished all her calculations, she channeled her mana and released it.

"Flames of the sky, fury of the gods since the beginning."

In the distance, dark clouds converged in unison.

The clouds in the sky obeyed Gracie's command, aligning precisely.

“In this moment, strike down my enemy."

Gracie opened her eyes, taking aim at the massive emission of mana.

She whispered softly,

“Lightning bolt.”

CHAPTER 136
SAINT HARUNA (4)

"What is that…?"

I watched as an immense beam of light fell from outside the window.

Even though it seemed to be happening at a distance, it was clearly visible.

"That was a quicker response than I expected."

Haruna, looking at the light, spoke to me.

The echoing voice of McGuire throughout the school.

The enormous light falling from the sky.

Professors rushing to evacuate the students.

Just as she said, the Rebels are approaching.

However, I had a question.

"Why didn't you warn us about the Rebels coming earlier? If you had, we could've prepared…"

"I couldn't do that. I wasn't certain this future would come to pass."

"What?"

"You might be familiar with the concept of dimensions, especially since you're from another one."

At Haruna's words, I frowned.

"Dimensions can refer to entirely different worlds, like the one you came from. But

they can also mean the same space at a different time, like the future or the past."

Haruna smiled.

"I can see all those dimensions. The future, the past, and other worlds."

“…What?"

I looked at Haruna in disbelief.

"So, even when I see the future, I can't always tell if it's the future of this world or another."

A power to see other worlds?

What kind of power was that?

Then…

"So, did you learn about me through that power?"

Unless she could read minds, there was no way she could know I had taken over this body.

While my actions might have been peculiar, they weren't definitive proof that I had come from another dimension.

"Regarding you, Rudy… I didn't find out through my powers…”

Haruna smiled with a hint of sadness.

"I heard it from my predecessor, the former Saint Beatrice."

My mind began to whirl.

And I glanced out of the window again.

"Everyone, move this way!"

"Is anyone else left in the building?"

"What's going on?"

The chaos outside suggested that it wasn't the best time to hear Haruna's story.

I fixed my gaze on Haruna.

"So, what do you want from me?"

Haruna smiled brightly.

"It's good to get straight to the point."

Saying that, she slowly approached and showed me the rosary she had untied from her neck.

"I'm going to use magic."

“…Magic?"

I frowned and examined the rosary Haruna held.

Several gem-like structures were embedded in the rosary.

But upon closer inspection, they weren't gems.

Mana crystals.

Tiny mana crystals were embedded in that rosary.

I turned to look at Haruna again.

"I will summon a future version of you. Specifically, your body."

My eyes widened at Haruna's words.

"We need you at your strongest, from every possible timeline. For the present, and for the future."

A beam of light descended from the heavens.

More precisely, a small orb of light burst through the clouds, heading straight for the distant Bone Dragon.

As the orb approached the dragon, those riding it scattered in all directions.

Only one man stood his ground, attempting to deflect it with his sword.

That man was Aryandor, the leader of the Rebels.

The moment his blade made contact with the light orb, a massive explosion ensued, obscuring all vision.

'It begins now.'

Observing from a distance, Professor Cromwell reached out a hand.

Circling light manifested around it, and a long staff materialized – Cromwell's own magical staff.

He then turned his gaze to Gracie.

Gracie seemed slightly out of breath.

"Can you still fight?"

"I can."

Despite her weariness from using a powerful spell, Gracie appeared to be in relatively good condition.

Cromwell desperately needed her assistance.

Even though she was his disciple, she had achieved significant accomplishments in another field and was recognized as a professor.

Despite being a junior faculty member, she was a formidable wizard.

While Cromwell's telekinetic magic was incredibly versatile, it wasn't specifically

tailored for combat, especially against a single opponent.

Thus, facing the leader of the Rebels, he needed Gracie's support.

"We need to draw the leader closer,"

Cromwell murmured.

Though Gracie's spell had affected their enemies, it was far from over.

Had the leader been so easily defeated, Principal McDowell wouldn't have received such grievous injuries.

Taking a deep breath, Cromwell released his mana, not concealing it but letting it radiate visibly all around, as if flaunting its overwhelming presence.

'Lure him out'

Calling out the rebel leader.

No one else was fit to confront this leader.

Cromwell knew it had to be him.

In the distance, a large figure emerged, making its way towards the academy after emerging from the smoke caused by Gracie's explosion.

It was the Bone Dragon.

Atop the dragon stood a man, looking seemingly unscathed.

However, the Bone Dragon itself was charred black.

It wasn't flying.

In fact, it was plummeting straight towards Cromwell.

The leader, as if challenging the academy to stop the crashing dragon, stood atop it, glaring intently at the institution.

The dragon was hurtling towards the academy's spire.

Cromwell quickly glanced below.

The students hadn't yet fully evacuated.

If the dragon crashed now, the spire would crumble, and the students below would be harmed.

"Professor!"

Gracie, realizing the imminent danger, called out.

Nodding, Cromwell responded,

"We have to stop it."

He then looked back at the leader, who met his gaze with an impassive expression.

Cromwell raised his hand.

"Gravity."

Yet, nothing seemed to happen around him.

A confused expression crossed Gracie's face.

Slowly… steadily… the approaching Bone Dragon.

Its descent was accelerating.

Cromwell, with a stoic expression, merely held his hand aloft.

"Professor, if you don't act now…"

"Stay put."

"Pro… Professor!!"

It was almost upon them.

Gracie tried to draw on her mana, intending to cast a spell herself.

Seeing this, Cromwell turned his head with a frown.

"I told you to stand still."

"But, soon…!"

That's when a strange noise reached their ears.

Whoosh…!

It wasn't the sound of the descending Bone Dragon.

Gracie turned her head towards the sound.

"Huh?"

What was flying toward them was a massive rock.

A colossal stone.

Boom!!!!!!

The stone collided squarely with the Bone Dragon.

It had been summoned from the mountains behind the academy.

Cromwell had drawn this massive rock from there.

The stone, having traveled at great speed from the mountains, crashed into the Bone Dragon, forcing it towards a vacant lot in the academy.

While the Bone Dragon was effectively stopped, it wasn't over.

From the distance, Aryandor, having witnessed the flying rock, leaped towards Cromwell.

Drawing his sword as he descended, Aryandor greeted,

"Hello there."

In response, Cromwell raised his staff.

"Gravity Hand."

Cromwell's spell clashed with Aryandor's blade.

Near the academy dormitory.

"What a mess."

Robert had seen everything.

Luna stood beside him.

With trembling hands, Luna tried to steady herself as she looked ahead.

Robert was in the middle of instructing Luna about staff synthesis.

However, suddenly, the principal's assistant arrived with a warning of impending danger.

Professor Mcguire was swiftly evacuating the students, and Robert was moving Luna to a safer location.

But, a man descended in front of them.

He descended on a wyvern made of bones.

His hair was unkempt, and dark circles marred his eyes.

A face Robert had never seen before.

It was instantly clear that this man wasn't an ally.

Seeing the skeletal wyvern beside him, Robert cautiously asked,

"Necromancy?"

It's a type of dark magic.

However, it slightly deviated from the conventional categories of dark magic.

It had its own established framework.

Despite being a dark magic, its structured nature was due to it being the most advanced among dark magics.

So advanced, in fact, that it was banned.

"I didn't expect to encounter someone who wields necromancy."

Robert subtly positioned Luna behind him for protection.

The man slightly lifted his head and spoke,

"Someone who was punished for using necromancy shouldn't be talking."

At this, Robert smirked,

"You recognize me?"

"Among those who know of necromancy, who wouldn't know you?"

The man responded without a hint of emotion,

"Those who practice necromancy consider you both a mentor and an enemy."

The man's words echoed what Robert had once said to Rudy about Levian.

Yet, Robert couldn't refute what the man said.

In the past, while secretly researching necromancy and serving as a Royal Wizard, he was discovered.

All those associated with him either died or were imprisoned.

The only reason he was spared was thanks to his mentor, Levian, and his contributions as a Royal Wizard.

"You're from Ephomos, aren't you?"

Ephomos.

A group once connected to Robert.

A place where the underprivileged, vagrants, and the impoverished gathered.

If the empire's capital was the light, this place was its shadow.

It was a haven for the fallen, where they tried to start anew.

However, after his necromancy research was exposed, the place vanished.

Erased by the empire itself.

"So, you're here for revenge now?"

Robert slowly channeled his mana.

The man nonchalantly shrugged,

"Revenge is too grand a word for what I intend, I'm just doing what needs to be done."

The man with pronounced dark circles under his eyes stamped his foot on the ground.

Immediately, the ground began to rumble.

"Uh…"

Luna, taken aback by the sudden quake, stepped back and looked around.

"Oh…"

Crack!

From the ground around them, skeletal hands began to emerge.

Skeletons.

Skeletons started to crawl out from the ground all around them.

And it wasn't just one or two.

So many that they completely surrounded Robert.

"Hmm."

Robert smirked, rubbing his chin.

"More than I expected."

Robert stretched, cracking his neck.

"Quality over quantity, though."

Then, a much louder rumble shook the place.

Robert's mana surged, causing the earth to upheave.

"Come forth, Behemoth."

CHAPTER 137
SAINT HARUNA (5)

“Come forth, Behemoth.”

The ground upheaved, revealing the massive form of the creature, Behemoth, vastly different from the smaller one Rudy once summoned.

As Behemoth rose, the skeletons that had stood upon the ground crumbled and were flung away.

Others were crushed under its massive feet.

With just its emergence, hundreds of skeletons were shattered.

Robert chuckled, saying,

"You shouldn't use necromancy like this."

Necromancy wasn't meant to be used so carelessly.

While one could argue that having the power to conjure such an army at will was incredible, it wasn't that simple.

While necromancy can instantly create an army, it requires proper preparation to be effective.

These hastily created skeletons were so fragile that even an ordinary person could shatter them.

To craft formidable skeletons, one needed to hand-pick corpses and bones, then imbue them with magic or treat them with special potions.

Since these skeletons skipped this process, they collapsed very easily.

The man with the dark circles under his eyes observed for a moment before

channeling his mana.

"Bone Spear."

Suddenly, the nearby skeletons transformed into spears made of bone, flying rapidly towards Behemoth.

Thud!

"Rooooaar…!"

Dozens of these spears lodged themselves into Behemoth, making it cry out in pain.

The opponent, having momentarily stopped Behemoth with the spears, channeled mana to the ground once more.

"Undead Rise, Lich."

A skeletal hand suddenly sprouted from the ground.

"While preparation is important for necromancy, skillfully summoning the right undead from available corpses on a battlefield is a talent in itself."

Beside him, a skeleton slowly rose, its eyes glowing a sinister red.

"Undead Rise, Death Knight."

He cast another spell, and beside the newly risen Lich appeared a skeleton clad in old armor, wielding a sword.

The aura surrounding this undead felt unnaturally ominous.

Robert then realized what the man meant.

The Academy was ancient, housing the remains of numerous talents from times past.

It wouldn't be surprising to find powerful remains buried here.

If anything, the academy was more likely to have the remains of these gifted beings than ordinary corpses.

Robert glanced momentarily at Luna standing behind him.

Luna, assessing the situation, began to pull out a spellbook from her bag.

But as she attempted to open the spellbook, Robert held it shut.

"Eh?"

Luna looked at Robert in confusion.

"I'll pave the way. You should join the other professors."

"But I can help fight…"

Robert shook his head.

"Do as I tell you."

Something felt off.

The spellbook Luna uses belongs to Levian.

The period when he was expelled for using necromancy, the period when those handling necromancy in Ephomos were massacred, and finally, the period when Levian's spellbook came into existence.

Was all of this just a coincidence?

To Robert, it seemed like the dots were connecting.

Of course, it might not be the case, but Robert felt there was no particular need to show that man Levian's spellbook.

"Behemoth."

"Pwoooh."

Then, Behemoth began to move.

Using its large trunk, it swiped away the skeletons before it.

It also targeted the Lich and Death Knight ahead.

“Hmm.”

The Death Knight, holding the man, leaped upwards.

Thanks to that, he was able to avoid Behemoth's attack, but numerous skeletons were swept away.

"Go."

Robert ordered Luna.

Overwhelmed by Robert's aura, Luna nodded,

"Okay."

And she ran along the path that Behemoth had cleared.

The man stared intently at the retreating Luna.

"Are you sure you want to let her go alone like that?"

Robert felt slightly uneasy.

He wasn't sure how many enemies were out there, but if Luna encountered another while fleeing, she would undoubtedly be in danger.

Still, he had instructed her to flee because he believed in Luna to an extent.

Robert moved his mana with a slight smile.

"How about you worry about not dying yourself?"

‘Should I summon Mephisto?’

The demon he summoned during the last fight with Oliver, Mephistopheles.

It was the demon Robert handled best and was the most powerful.

However, summoning it now wasn't a good idea.

He didn’t know how many enemies there were.

Given the large sword strike and the explosion of Cromwell’s magic earlier, the leader of the rebels had also arrived.

It was necessary to pace his mana properly.

"What's your name?"

Robert asked the man before him.

"Daemon."

Robert looked at him with slight surprise.

He had expected a rebel to hide their identity, but Daemon had responded openly.

He might be someone who didn’t care about such things.

"Well, now that introductions are out of the way."

Robert raised his hand to the sky.

"Let's have a proper fight this time."

Then, a large magic circle was drawn in the sky.

"Giant of Gluttony, Nephilim, show yourself."

Then the magic circle turned black, and a massive foot began to emerge from within.

A giant.

The giant that consumes everything, Nephilim.

While it was quite weak when facing fewer enemies but it showed tremendous power against larger numbers like a horde of skeletons.

With a smirk, Robert commanded,

"Devour everything."

"Uooooh……”

Nephilim began grabbing and swallowing the skeletons on the ground.

And swallowed them.

A giant that becomes stronger as it consumes its enemies.

That was Nephilim.

“Ugh…”

At the main entrance of Liberion Academy.

Two girls were quickly making their way through: Rie and Yuni.

They were on their way back from having tea outside the academy.

However, as soon as they arrived at the academy, it started to become chaotic, and large explosions occurred around them.

Yuni was particularly in high spirits today.

Whether in the royal palace or at the academy, there were hardly any moments she spent with Rie.

Because Rie disliked her.

Even if Yuni occasionally saw Rie, there was no real time spent together.

Whenever Yuni suggested having tea, Rie would decline.

Whenever their eyes met, Rie made it blatantly clear that she disliked her.

But today was definitely a good day.

She went outside the academy, had tea with Rie, and now…

“Hold on tight, Yuni.”

Rie firmly grasped Yuni’s hand, leading her forward.

‘Isn’t this rather nice?’

Yuni felt like she had returned to her childhood.

The days when Rie would hold her hand, hiding in the royal garden, came flooding back.

Looking ahead, Rie asked,

“Sylph, what's ahead?”

A green-tinted hawk, Sylph, appeared in response.

“There's a man holding a large sword. He's not from the academy.”

Rie frowned at this.

“Can we sneak past him?”

"I’m not sure. I don't know to what extent he can sense our presence.”

Rie nodded at Sylph's words.

“Alright. If there's anyone in the main building who can help, call them. If not in the main building, then anywhere else."

“Understood.”

With that, Sylph vanished like a wisp of smoke.

“A man with a large sword… a swordsman…”

Rie pondered, her hand on her chin.

Typically, men wielding large swords were swordsmen.

Of course, there was Borval, who carried a massive axe but was a wizard.

However, he was an exceptional case.

“What's he doing there?”

With a serious expression, Rie peeked out from the bushes near the academy’s entrance.

Currently, both Yuni and Rie were hiding in these bushes.

The mysterious man stood in the pathway leading from the bushes to the main building.

Turning her head, Rie looked at Yuni.

When their eyes met, Yuni tilted her head with a slight smile.

“Sigh… Aren't you worried at all?”

Yuni shrugged, replying,

“Why should I? I'm safe with you, aren’t I? Hiding here seems safest. The professors will surely protect the others.”

At Yuni's words, Rie sighed.

Indeed, staying hidden here might be the safest until the situation is resolved.

Still, the man’s actions up ahead were unsettling.

That man wasn’t there from the start.

As Rie and Yuni were fleeing, he suddenly descended from the sky.

Upon landing, he surveyed the area before gradually walking towards the main

building of Liberion Academy.

"What is he up to?"

Upon reaching a certain distance from the building, he unsheathed his sword, positioning himself to strike the structure horizontally.

"He intends to cut the building?"

Rie furrowed her brows.

Sure, an ordinary building might be cut, but not here, not at Liberion Academy.

Particularly that main building, which housed countless magical and alchemical tools.

It was like a powder keg.

As a result, dozens of protective spells blanketed the building.

If it were destroyed, the surroundings would be devastated, a fact well-known to the academy's officials who had placed those protections.

"It feels somewhat ominous, doesn't it?"

But, there's no way that man didn't know this fact.

He, after all, had infiltrated the academy.

And yet, he was making this attempt.

A dark aura swirled around his greatsword, steadily intensifying.

"Ha…!"

The man was serious.

He was genuinely aiming to cut down the building, especially at a moment when the professors were busy evacuating the students.

Turning her head, Rie noticed Yuni, huddled beside her.

Gently grabbing Yuni's shoulders, she instructed,

"Yuni, no matter what, stay here and don't come out."

Yuni's eyes widened in response.

Looking at Yuni, Rie spoke once more.

"Promise me, you absolutely cannot come out."

Being a mere first-year, Yuni hadn't even learned intermediate magic yet.

The responsibility fell solely on Rie.

A brief distraction was all she needed, just enough to alert the professors of the intruder's presence.

Once the professors arrived, they would handle the situation.

She had already sent a Sylph, so a professor was bound to arrive soon.

She just needed to hold on for a little longer.

As Rie was about to make her move, Yuni suddenly grabbed her wrist.

"Don't go. It's too dangerous. Please, just wait with me here."

Usually, Yuni was always composed, even during sudden peculiar events.

But now, she seemed genuinely distressed, desperately trying to stop Rie.

But she couldn't just stand by.

If the man managed to slice through the building, the consequences would be dire.

Even if the professors survive, the students around them…

Rie thought she had to act.

Even if she was the Imperial Princess, destined for the Emperor’s throne, even if she was more valuable due to this, she couldn't just stand by and watch.

Rie gently freed her wrist from Yuni's grasp.

"I'll be back soon."

She said, flashing a reassuring smile before dashing out of the bushes.

CHAPTER 138
SAINT HARUNA (6)

"It might be a foolish…”

Rie thought as she emerged from the thicket.

She had already assumed that her opponent was strong enough to attack the main building of the academy.

Naturally, it meant confronting someone she might not be able to defeat.

Still, she didn't stop her steps.

"Am I becoming more like him…?"

Rudy Astria, who would act selflessly when others were in danger, prioritizing them over his own safety.

At first, Rie found such behavior incredibly foolish.

How could one risk their life so readily for the sake of others?

She couldn't understand it.

Yet, there she was, now moving without hesitation.

As these thoughts swirled in her mind, Rie let out a soft chuckle.

'Even in a situation like this, I'm thinking of Rudy… '

It felt ridiculous to her, even amusing, that she was pondering about Rudy when the circumstances were so dire.

Taking a deep breath, Rie shook off her distractions.

Thinking of Rudy was comforting, but now wasn't the time.

She could indulge in such reflections once everything was over.

Rie crouched, approaching the man stealthily, making sure not to make a sound.

He seemed to be focused on gathering his sword's energy, unaware of Rie's approach.

'I need to interrupt him first… '

Mana began to gather in Rie's hand.

She needed a conspicuous and potent spell.

Though Sylph was searching for help, there was a chance they wouldn't find any.

Hence, a noticeable spell to catch others' attention was crucial.

A massive explosion would surely draw someone's attention.

Rie took precise aim at the man holding the sword.

The first move was important.

His attention was elsewhere, so this was perfect opportunity.

If he started to move properly, it would be much harder to land a spell on him.

She only had one shot.

The most potent magic Rie could harness.

"Let my mana turn crimson…"

Despite her busy schedule with political matters and student council duties, Rie hadn't neglected her magical training.

She didn't want to fall behind Rudy.

Rudy, who always moved forward, had shown remarkable growth.

If she hesitated even slightly, the gap between them would widen significantly.

To support him, she had to advance, even if just a bit.

And now was the time to showcase the fruits of her rigorous training.

"To incinerate even the traces of my opponent."

Rie's explosive magic.

The most potent spell among them.

A deep red hue began swirling around Rie's hand.

"Rage Flare."

Upon completing her incantation, the sword-wielding opponent turned his head.

But it was too late; the spell was already cast.

Red dots began to appear around his body.

They multiplied, and soon, those dots started glowing brilliantly.

Like rising embers, one by one, they began to ignite.

The opponent, seeing this, readied his sword again.

But not at the building – he aimed for Rie.

"It's already too late."

Rie clenched her outstretched hand.

Crack.

The dots surrounding the opponent cracked, and from those cracks, light poured out.

"Explode."

The dots began to detonate in a chain reaction.

A series of explosions sent flames soaring into the sky, wrapping around the entire area.

The opponent was engulfed by the flames.

“Ha…!”

However, that was all.

The flames from the explosion were abruptly split in half.

A black sword aura, appearing seemingly out of nowhere, effortlessly sliced through Rie's flames.

This storm of sword aura didn’t just slice the flames, it hurtled towards Rie.

“Huff…!”

Rie ducked her head, narrowly avoiding the oncoming storm.

"Huh?"

A strand of her hair, lightly tossed in the wind, was cut by the blade's aura.

It was a blade aura that, even without proper preparation or trajectory, was remarkably sharp.

Rie glanced at her fallen strand of hair on the ground.

Raising her head slightly, she looked ahead.

A man walked out from between the flames.

His upper clothing appeared to have been partially burned away.

Burn scars were visible through the remnants of his clothes.

He had dozens of scars on his body, making any she'd seen before seem insignificant.

However, these weren’t wounds inflicted by Rie.

They weren't burns, but sword wounds… and they had already healed over.

With a scowl, the man continued to approach Rie.

"Who are you?"

"Eh…”

There wasn't a single wound on him.

She was sure she had used her most powerful magic, and yet he walked towards her without a significant injury.

The difference in their abilities was vast.

But this was within her expectations.

The large explosion had surely alerted others to the commotion here.

All she needed to do was hold out.

If she could restrain this man and hold out for a while…

"I asked who you are."

He looked at Rie with a haughty gaze.

Rie straightened up, meeting his gaze squarely.

"Rie Von Ristonia."

Regardless of his strength or seemingly insurmountable power, she wouldn't back down.

That unyielding spirit, that drive to always move forward, was Rie's greatest strength.

"First Princess of the Empire…”

She paused, lowering her head briefly, then raised it with a confident smile.

"Vice-President of Liberion Academy's Student Council."

"Hmm…”

The man frowned at Rie's audacious demeanor.

"So, you're the Royal princess."

Upon hearing Rie’s name, he pointed his sword at her.

"I am Venderwood, a slave."

Despite introducing himself as a slave, his demeanor was undeniably confident.

But something was wrong.

How could someone in the position of a slave possess such power?

Of course, there were slaves skilled in combat, but none with such overwhelming strength.

"Still, you seem a bit better than those trashy nobles. So, you're the one standing atop them all?"

"Trashy?"

Rie frowned at the word.

Venderwood simply shrugged.

"Never mind."

Venderwood straightened his giant sword, pointing it at Rie.

It was a colossal blade, just a tad shorter than Rie herself.

"Prepare yourself."

Rie moved her mana in response.

She'd hold on as long as possible.

Until someone comes to her aid.

Yuni watched Rie from the bushes.

Rie's magic was devastating.

If Yuni had been at the epicenter, she felt she wouldn't have survived.

Yet, Venderwood withstood it effortlessly.

She couldn't fathom just how monstrous he truly was.

"Sister…"

Yet, even so, Rie stood her ground, fearlessly confronting Venderwood.

Bam!

"Ugh…"

And she was still doing so, evading Venderwood's relentless attacks, standing firm and fighting, no matter how dire it seemed.

Wounds of varying sizes marked Rie's body.

But still, Rie's gaze never wavered.

Her spirit remained unbroken.

She refused to give up.

"Huff… Huff…"

Yuni noticed Rie's ragged breathing.

Though she evaded attacks, she never fled.

Rie had always been like that.

While Yuni had cooperated with the noble faction and taken the easy path, Rie had always resisted them.

No matter the harassment or temptation they offered, Rie stood firm.

Despite having an easier path before her, she stood tall with dignity.

Yuni couldn't understand the pain that must have taken.

She only admired it.

Wondering what it felt like to stand where Rie stood.

So, Yuni had a thought.

She wanted to stand beside Rie.

However, she didn't want to pull down or manipulate the sister she admired.

She just wanted to compete with her fair and square for the successor position.

This is why Yuni considered using Rudy.

Someone with the potential to even surpass Ian, the favored successor of the Astria family.

With him by her side, she believed she could be a proper successor, backed by the Astria family, rather than just a puppet.

But now, she wasn’t so sure.

Seeing the battle unfold, she felt she wasn’t even in the same league.

Rie's resilience, even in the face of such overwhelming power, made Yuni hesitant to

even think of following in her footsteps.

She realized that even if she rose to a similar position, she wouldn't become like her.

Then, a strike flew towards Rie.

It was in a hard-to-evade position.

Rie tried to use a barrier to block the attack.

"Damn…”

With her mana nearly exhausted and her body worn out, Rie's attempt to block Venderwood's attack with a barrier was barely sufficient.

“Ugh…”

In the end, Rie's barrier shattered under the force of the sword strike, and she sustained a cut to her leg.

Rie fell.

With her leg injured, escaping was now impossible.

Yuni watched the scene unfold before her with wide eyes.

A man with a greatsword approached the sister she looked up to.

Yuni’s shaky gaze turned to the main academy building.

“Why… Why is no one coming…?”

She was sure Rie had called for help from the academy.

Though Yuni wasn't sure how long Rie had held off, it felt like an eternity to her.

Her sister was in danger, and she could do nothing about it.

She could only watch, feeling utterly powerless.

The man closed the gap.

As he neared Rie, she tried to use magic while dragging her injured leg, but it didn't affect him in the slightest.

He just kept advancing.

And when he was almost upon Rie,

"No."

Yuni moved.

She had to protect her sister.

"Wind, Wind Blaster…!"

Emerging from the bushes, Yuni cast her spell.

A powerful blade of wind hurtled towards the man, whose name she now remembered as Venderwood.

But just as Rie's magic had no effect on him, neither did Yuni's.

Even a surprise attack couldn't penetrate the reinforced body of such a skilled swordsman.

Venderwood, unfazed by Yuni's magic, turned his head to look at her.

"Yu… Yuni…!"

Rie's voice rang out in alarm.

Yuni, her legs shaking as if she was a newborn deer, reached out towards Venderwood, her eyes fixed on Rie.

She opened her mouth.

"Sis…"

Fear was evident in Yuni’s voice.

Yet, she managed a faint smile and said,

“Run…”

In an instant, Venderwood was upon Yuni.

She couldn’t even react.

And then.

“Ah.”

Venderwood's hand, surrounded by a mana glow, pierced right through Yuni's abdomen.

His mana-infused hand was more than enough to pierce the delicate frame of Yuni.

Holding Yuni with her abdomen impaled, Venderwood looked into her face.

“Just a kid.”

“Guh…”

Yuni let out a rough breath, tears that had been pooling in her eyes now flowing freely.

“Yu… ni?”

Rie watched in horror, her eyes widening.

Tears filled Rie's eyes.

Though Yuni sometimes acted peculiarly, she was still her sister.

They had grown up together; she had always looked after Yuni, finding her annoying at times but never disliking her.

Now, that very sister had been impaled by a man's hand.

“Ah… No… No…”

Rie sobbed, tears streaming down her face.

“No… Please…”

Struggling, Rie tried to get up and shouted.

At that, Venderwood withdrew his hand from Yuni's abdomen.

Yuni crumpled to the ground.

“You’re next.”

With an air of indifference, Venderwood, with his sword in hand, moved towards Rie.

“Heuu…”

Rie let out a mournful sound, her eyes widened in alarm as she glared at Venderwood.

She attempted to use her mana.

“Ah.”

But, her mana was almost depleted.

No magic emerged.

Seeing this, Venderwood quickly charged at her.

"This is the end."

“My, feet…”

Closing her eyes tight, Rie braced herself.

Suddenly, an unexpected sound echoed.

“What…? Who are…”

“Spatial Slash.”

The voice was familiar.

A slicing noise.

“Kuk…! What is this…”

Startled by Venderwood's sudden scream, Rie cautiously opened her eyes.

But Venderwood was nowhere in sight.

Instead, someone's back was in her view, standing protectively before her.

“Huh?”

Recognizable golden hair.

But this wasn't the blond-haired person Rie knew.

This person was slightly shorter.

And he hadn’t used such magic before.

Rie, having observed him frequently, knew this well.

The person shielding Rie then turned his head.

“Ah.”

A face she recognized.

But, something was slightly off.

“Rudy?”

CHAPTER 139
SAINT HARUNA (7)

Academy Main Building, Student Council Room.

"Then, let's begin."

Haruna, in front of me, closed her eyes and raised her hand above my head.

In her other hand, she tightly gripped a rosary, assuming a prayer-like posture.

"Once I activate the magic, your body will transform into another. You will remain in this transformed state for only two hours, during which you must resolve everything."

Light began to emanate from Haruna's rosary.

"But just because my body changes doesn't mean I can use its abilities, right?"

Surely, if my body changed, aspects like my mana might increase, but the real issue was knowledge.

To use magic, you need to understand its theory and also develop a certain intuitive feel for it.

Haruna shook her head in response.

"It's not just a body switch. Essentially, your consciousness will enter that person, so you'll be able to access all the knowledge that the future you possesses."

Being able to access knowledge…?

"Does accessing the knowledge mean I can see how I grow in the future?"

"Yes. You will know everything from the path that person has walked, to what abilities they can use, and even how to use those abilities."

The future me.

The me from the strongest timeline.

It's practically an answer key.

A guide indicating where I should head.

Is this what Haruna meant by doing this for the future?

"Then, I'm ready."

As I agreed, intense light spilled from the rosary.

I closed my eyes and surrendered to the light.

Suddenly, my body felt like it was swept into some space.

My body jolted, feeling strange, and I opened my eyes.

Haruna was nowhere, and only darkness greeted me.

“Ugh……! What……”

Then, suddenly, my body started to move rapidly.

My head is spinning.

Being swept somewhere.

Into the darkness.

I kept going into it, falling endlessly.

"What is this…!"

I tried to get a hold of myself, but the dizziness made it hard to grasp the situation.

As I was pulled further into the darkness, I saw a distant light.

My body started moving towards it.

I tightly shut my eyes against the overwhelming brightness.

I felt the light weakening and blinked my eyes open.

“Ah……?”

Before my eyes, an unbelievable sight unfolded.

Collapsed buildings.

The surroundings looked like ruins.

Only the sight of a vast wasteland, consumed by flames, was visible.

I stood in the center of it all.

"Where is this……”

With a baffled expression, I surveyed the surroundings.

Something was odd.

Despite the devastation, the place felt familiar.

Weirdly… the surroundings felt familiar.

The mountain visible in the background…

The positions of the collapsed buildings.

And then……

“Ah?”

The clothes I was wearing.

It was Liberion Academy’s uniform.

There was only one place where I'd wear this uniform.

"Ah…… Academy?"

This was Liberion Academy.

And then……

When I tried to look elsewhere, my body began to be swept away just like when I came here.

"What is this……!!"

I tried to shout, but it felt as if something was choking me.

Then… I lost consciousness.

"Ugh…"

I slowly started to regain consciousness.

"Are you alright?"

I heard Haruna's voice beside me.

"Uh… I think I'm okay…"

I spoke to Haruna while slowly lifting my body.

"How do you feel? Does it seem like you came back normally?"

"Normally……?"

How would I know if the one who used the magic doesn't know?

I looked at Haruna, wondering what she meant.

Seeing Haruna's face, I felt something was off.

Even though she had her eyes open, her focus was not right.

Empty pupils.

Despite me standing in front of her, it was as if she wasn't seeing me.

As if she couldn’t see anything at all…

"Haruna, are you okay?"

“Yes, I'm fine. I just can't see in front of me, but everything else seems fine.”

And that's okay?

“We need to treat you right now…”

"No."

Haruna spoke firmly.

“We have more pressing matters at hand.”

"That's right. We don't have time to take it easy."

Then, a voice was heard from behind me.

A green-colored magic creature was sitting behind me.

“…Sylph?"

The intermediate wind elemental, Sylph, was sitting behind me.

"Rie and Yuni are in danger."

"Rie is…?"

Then, Haruna, who was next to me, also spoke.

"Just now, there was a large explosion sound in front of the building."

Sylph continued.

"Since Rie is there, something has happened."

Hearing that, my eyes widened.

"I'll go check it out. Haruna, you stay here. I'll be back soon."

Then, Haruna smiled.

"Understood."

I got up and looked forward.

However, what abilities do I have…?

As I thought for a moment, a flood of knowledge started pouring in.

Like speed-reading through a book, countless pieces of information entered my brain.

"Huh?"

Then… I began to understand the world I had just seen.

This future me… had gone through the same developmental process as the current me.

"What is this…"

I opened my mouth in astonishment.

However, panicking wasn't an option.

I closed my mouth and clenched my teeth tightly.

The present is more important than the possible future.

I shook my head and used magic.

"Teleport."

Space magic.

A magic only the Astria family can learn.

The future me was able to use this magic.

The scene before me changed.

In front of me, there was a man holding a large sword, and further away, Yuni was seen bleeding.

"Ah."

Seeing that, I let out a sigh.

Turning my head for a moment, there was Rie, tightly closing her eyes and shedding tears.

The once strong and resilient Rie was now in tears.

I turned my head and reached out my hand.

"Who are you……”

I used magic before the other person could respond.

"Spatial Slash*."

Then, as if a sword was being swung, a line was drawn in space.

"Ah."

A line appeared on the arm of the other party.

The arm holding the sword was severed.

"Ugh……!! Who are you? What is this……”

The opponent screamed in surprise as the arm holding the sword was cut off.

I looked at the person with a cold face.

The one who made Yuni like that and tried to kill Rie.

Looking at him, my anger surged.

My anger boiled as I looked at him, making my face even more impassive.

“Ah.”

Then, a voice came from behind.

It was Rie's voice.

I slightly turned my head and looked at Rie.

Rie was looking at me with a surprised face, tears streaming down her cheeks.

“Rudy?”

Seeing Rie like that, my expression softened a bit.

I gave a faint smile.

"I'll finish this quickly, Rie. Just wait a moment.”

I then moved my mana again.

"Ha……!"

The man looked at me and let out a laugh.

Despite his arm being cut off, it was unbelievable.

“Will cutting off your head stop that laughter?”

"You can’t kill me."

Then, something strange happened to his arm.

The severed surface swelled up, and the swollen part took shape, recreating the form of an arm.

Does he regenerate even after death?

Seeing that, I thought I understood what he meant.

"Hmm, is that so?"

I lifted the corner of my mouth.

"Then I won't kill you."

I stretched out my hand.

"Spatial Rift."

Crack.

I aimed a rift at his core.

A direct impact on the very fabric of space.

His body seemed to fracture, much like cracks in a windowpane.

However, he had already seen the technique.

He didn't just stand there and take it.

"Ugh……”

He moved his body quickly and escaped from the rift.

As he escaped from the rift, he rushed toward me.

I grabbed Rie’s hand behind me.

"Huh?"

"Teleport."

In an instant, Rie and I moved.

The opponent, running toward me with his sword, opened his eyes wide as our figures suddenly disappeared.

"What the……”

I had teleported near Yuni.

Rie, suddenly relocated, was very surprised.

Also, seeing Yuni collapsed below, she screamed loudly.

"Yuni……!"

Rie immediately bent down and grabbed Yuni.

"She’s still breathing!"

Rie said to me as she looked up.

I held Rie's shoulder, reassuringly, and quietly opened my mouth.

"I’ll finish this and be right back."

I stood up again and looked at my opponent.

I walked towards him.

"Huh!"

He gripped his greatsword, dark energy swirling around it, and approached me quickly.

It was undoubtedly threatening.

If it could emit sword aura to that extent, the original me would have never won.

Given his enhanced physique and regenerative ability, there was no way my past self could've defeated him.

But now, it's different.

From what I knew, a space magic user was a swordsman’s worst nightmare.

When you slice through space, you can cut through even the most solid objects.

A swordsman's physical enhancement ability would be practically useless.

If I use the other abilities I have on top of that……

The opponent swiftly approached and opened his mouth.

"One Slash."

He lifted his sword and slashed it down from above.

"Dark Flame."

A massive sword strike flew towards me.

A tremendous sized sword strike.

It was something I can dodge, but Rie and Yuni were behind me.

"Priscilla."

As I spoke, a large wolf appeared behind me.

A wolf with a mix of blue and silver fur.

It was the Ice Elemental, Priscilla.

"Freeze it."

"Grrrrr……”

As I spoke, Priscilla stretched her leg forward.

As Priscilla took a step forward, the dark sword energy gradually slowed down and began to freeze.

From the ground up, all of the sword energy began to freeze.

It was Priscilla's ability to freeze even mana.

"Hah……!"

The opponent, seeing this, looked at me as if in disbelief.

"Shall we finish this then?"

I looked at the frozen sword aura and slightly raised the corners of my mouth.

Then, Priscilla spoke from behind me.

"What's gotten into you?"

Priscilla spoke to me as if she didn’t understand.

"Oh, Priscilla. We'll talk later…”

"Why did you summon me?"

"Huh?"

I opened my eyes wide.

Priscilla seemed different.

The Priscilla of the future…

"I'm sorry, Priscilla. It seems like now is not the time for conversation."

I smiled awkwardly and spoke to Priscilla.

"Can you freeze that guy for now?"

“…Fine."

Priscilla glanced at me with a slight glare and nodded.

The opponent attempted to swing his sword again.

But before that, Priscilla's mana moved, and his legs slowly began to freeze.

“Kuh……”

He looked at his freezing legs and scowled.

In a bold move, he cut off his own legs with his greatsword.

Blood splattered, and he collapsed to the ground.

It was meaningless.

Without legs, he couldn't move.

Freezing him was an action meant to immobilize him, so it didn’t matter.

"Spatial Rift."

"Ah."

The opponent opened his mouth when he heard my words.

A rift formed in the center of his collapsed body.

"I… will… not… die…!"

"Sure, you won't."

I clenched my fist tightly.

Then, bits of his flesh splattered around.

From his face to his body, he was fragmented into pieces.

The opponent couldn’t even scream properly and turned into small flesh lumps.

A technique that inflicts a shock to the space itself, tearing everything in that place into pieces.

Its power was, needless to say, immense.

However, the opponent's body was extremely bizarre.

The fallen flesh slowly gathered.

Like a split slime rejoining, it wobbles and regenerates.

"I… will… not… die…”

He spoke again as he regenerated.

I could continue to inflict pain in this way, but that would be time-consuming.

I had limited time with this body.

However, that wasn't the real issue.

Yuni, lying down.

I have to treat Yuni quickly.

If it gets any later, it might become serious.

"Space Creation."

Then, a black circle was drawn, and a new space emerged.

"Swallow him."

I put mana into that space and sucked the opponent into it.

"Ah…”

The opponent's body began to be sucked into the space before it could regenerate again.

"Kuaaak… The master will…!"

The opponent tried to shout something, but he was sucked into the space.

"Whew…”

I exhaled deeply after watching that.

CHAPTER 140
SAINT HARUNA (8)

"Quickly, let's move! There are people over there who can use healing magic!"

"Yes! Understood!"

I used space magic to transport Rie and Yuni to a safe location.

It was a place where people were gathered.

It appeared to be a training ground where students were hiding.

Mcguire seemed to have gathered the students and evacuated them to that training ground.

"What on earth happened?"

Mcguire looked at me with a serious expression.

He's probably asking about why Yuni was in such a state.

"She was attacked by one of the rebels."

"What? And the opponent?"

"I took care of him."

Mcguire's eyes widened at my words.

"You defeated the rebel… yourself?"

His response seemed to question how I did it.

It was natural.

It seemed I had taken on someone at a high rank within the rebels.

"Speaking of which, you look… different."

"Oh."

Had my appearance changed too?

I hadn't looked in a mirror yet, so I haven't seen how I've changed.

The future me seems to have grown noticeably more than my present self. Judging from my slightly elevated viewpoint, I seemed a bit taller…

I casually noted this, shrugging my shoulders.

"There was a bit of an incident."

Then, someone pulled at my sleeve from behind.

It was Rie.

Tear streaks were still vivid in Rie's eyes.

Rie, tightly gripping my sleeve, looked at Mcguire.

"Will Yuni… be okay?"

Upon hearing this, Mcguire gave a faint smile and nodded.

"There might be a scar on her stomach, but it's not life-threatening. Of course, she will have to stay in the hospital for a while though…"

"Haah…"

Rie, seeming to relax, sat down on the floor and exhaled a sigh of relief.

She scrunched her nose as if she was about to cry again.

I crouched down in front of Rie like that and smiled.

"Don’t worry. It’s okay now. Why are you about to cry again?"

I tapped Rie on the head as I said that.

"Huh…”

Upon my words, she glared at me.

"I'm… not going to cry."

Rie spoke with a slightly choked voice.

Even though they often seemed at odds, Rie truly cared for her sister.

"I’ll be right back."

"What? Where to…”

I pointed my finger towards the tower.

The magic and sword auras that have been visible since earlier.

I had a rough idea who might be there.

The continuous lightning falling from the sky was likely Gracie, and the sword aura, Aryandor.

The stones and various items floating around were most likely Cromwell.

"I'll be back in a flash."

"Haa… Haa…”

Professor Cromwell, panted heavily.

Behind him was Professor Gracie.

"How can he have such a fraudulent power…”

Aryandor, unscathed compared to the injured Cromwell and Gracie, wore a mocking smile.

"Why not spare yourself this struggle and hand over Rudy Astria?"

Cromwell glared at Aryandor for making such a suggestion.

"We will never hand him over."

At the same time, Cromwell thought to himself.

'So this is what it meant to use time… '

He had heard a rough explanation from McDowell, but the method he used this time differed slightly from what McDowell had told him.

It felt like a more advanced application of the concept.

'But… at this rate, we won't win.'

He had to fight differently from how he usually fought.

To defeat that guy…

"Professor, what should we do?"

Gracie spoke from behind him at that moment.

Cromwell licked his lips slightly and opened his mouth.

“…For now, we can only continue to fight."

There must be a weak point.

"There is always a solution to magic used by humans."

Magic is a tool of mankind.

It's a technique that creates countless miracles, but because it's human-made, it has its flaws.

"Puhaha…”

Aryandor burst out laughing at those words.

"This is not the domain of humans."

Aryandor raised his hand to the sky and spoke.

"It's magic that approaches the realm of the gods. The power of time is the first ability created by them."

At that, Cromwell lifted the corner of his mouth.

"But the user is human, right?"

"Can a being that can use this power be called a human?"

Aryandor spoke as if to counter Cromwell’s words.

Seeing Cromwell frown at those words, Aryandor snorted and moved his sword.

"Alright, then keep trying to block it."

Aryandor took a posture to swing his sword.

"See if I am human, or one who has approached the domain of the gods."

"Hoo…”

Cromwell also prepared his magic.

"Huh?"

A person's figure appeared in front of Cromwell.

A person standing with their back turned to him.

At the sudden appearance, Cromwell's brow furrowed.

It seemed like a stranger.

He knew most of the blondes in the academy, given how few there were.

However, none had such capabilities or height.

A rebel?

But looking at the clothes the person was wearing, confusion set in.

The uniform of the Liberion Academy.

The person was wearing a school uniform.

Then Aryandor opened his mouth, laughing.

"Oh, he came on his own. Rudy Astria."

Aryandor spoke with a laugh.

"Rudy Astria… is that so?"

Cromwell widened his eyes.

The energy he felt, even the boy's height, was different from Rudy Astria.

Then, the man in front turned around slightly and opened his mouth.

"Professor, are you okay?"

Seeing his face made it clear.

It was Rudy Astria, but the slightly naive demeanor was gone.

"What? How…"

Cromwell stared at Rudy with a bewildered face.

"Now doesn't seem like the time for explanations."

Rudy turned his head back to look at Aryandor.

Aryandor opened his mouth with a smile.

"Rudy Astria, nice to meet you. I am…"

That's when Rudy moved quickly.

No, rather than moving, he teleported using magic.

"Teleport."

"Huh?"

Aryandor, suddenly attacked by Rudy, opened his eyes wide.

In an instant, Rudy, who had reached in front of Aryandor, raised his fist.

"Ha!"

Then, he gathered mana in his hand, and struck down.

Kwa-aaaaang!!!

"Cough…!"

A punch far more powerful than any he'd thrown before.

Aryandor took the punch and was sent flying far away.

He crashed into the ground far away.

Just one hit.

It was just one punch.

Rudy, watching Aryandor crumpled on the ground from just one hit, furrowed his brow.

"…What?"

"Whew… whew…”

A woman was running hastily inside the academy.

A woman with brown hair.

She was running, clutching a magic book tightly to her chest.

Luna caught her breath, briefly glancing over her shoulder.

"I wonder if Professor is alright…”

She had fled because Professor Robert had told her to, but she couldn’t help but worry.

"Sigh…”

Luna had not yet understood the situation.

She needed to find the others first to truly understand what was going on.

Regaining her breath to some degree, Luna tried to move her legs again.

"Hmm~."

At that moment, a humming sound came from somewhere.

"Huh?"

Luna quickly hid herself.

In a seemingly empty hallway, no student would be humming so carefree.

It had to be a rebel.

Luna held her breath and crouched down, her back against the wall.

"Well, this place is done~."

‘Huh?’

The voice sounded vaguely familiar.

Still leaning against the wall, Luna cautiously peeked toward the source of the voice.

A girl, wearing a witch's hat, was fiddling with something.

It was Jefrin.

'What… is she doing there?'

While everyone else is fighting fiercely, what is she doing all alone…?

Luna looked towards her with a puzzled expression.

After messing with something in the corner for a while, Jefrin got up from her spot.

"Shall we go somewhere else then~."

Jefrin flung the broom she was holding.

The broom then floated in the air.

She mounted the broom.

"Where to next~ hmm~."

Singing, Jefrin rode her broom and flew to another place.

"…What?"

Luna stared blankly at Jefrin then turned her gaze.

Where Jefrin had been, an object was left behind.

Luna got up and walked over to it.

A square box lay on the floor.

She felt mana emanating from it.

"A magical tool…?"

Luna furrowed her eyebrows and tapped the box lightly.

“Why leave this here?”

No matter how much she thought about it, it was suspicious.

A wizard busily installing something while everyone else was fighting.

It obviously looked like she was up to something.

Luna unfolded her magic book.

“Activate.”

She spread a page of the magic book and infused it with mana.

A light emitted from the magic book and the light entered the magical tool Jefrin had set up.

Analytical magic.

A magic to understand what kind of structure the magical circles inside the magical tool formed.

“There are two magic circles?”

Luna slowly read the appearing magic circles.

“One is… explosion magic.”

It was predicted to be a spell that would explode the surroundings if the box was opened.

Luna had roughly anticipated this, so she had deliberately not opened the box first.

"Then the other one is……”

Luna turned her head and looked at the magic circle next to her.

"Um……”

She frowned and tried hard to read the magic circle, but it was difficult to know the exact content.

It was a magic circle she was seeing for the first time.

"What is…… this……”

Luna fell into thought, touching her chin.

Soon, Luna shrugged her shoulders.

"Well, it's fine."

After that, Luna confidently lifted the box.

The usual way to deal with such a tool was simply to move it to another place.

A straightforward solution.

Yet, it was a reliable one.

Whoever created this device likely took into consideration the potential for incorrect installation, so merely moving it would not cause an explosion.

Given how Jefrin had been fiddling with the box earlier, shifting its position, Luna felt reasonably certain about this.

"I should ask the others about this."

After giving the box a final glance, Luna stowed it in her bag and set off towards where the others were.

CHAPTER 141
SAINT HARUNA (9)

“…What?"

I stared at the cloud of dust rising from the floor.

The fight started with a punch, but it left me somewhat bewildered that I was able to drive him into the ground in one move.

Then, a voice sounded from behind me.

"What's this?"

"Huh?"

The voice was neither Cromwell's nor Gracie's.

Aryandor.

It was decidedly Aryandor's voice, the one who had surely been slammed to the floor.

Aryandor was right behind me.

However, he did not attack.

"Huh!"

I swung my fist towards my immediate rear.

Aryandor lightly stepped back, avoiding my attack with ease.

"Surely, you look like Rudy Astria, but…”

Aryandor spoke, rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

I squinted, looking at him intently.

What just happened?

I was sure I saw him hit the floor…

"Rudy Astria, it's time magic!"

Cromwell, who was a distance away, spoke as he cast a spell.

Cromwell's gravity magic targeted Aryandor, but Aryandor dodged the attack with ease.

After effortlessly evading Cromwell's attack, Aryandor continued to gaze at me.

"Who are you?"

"What?"

"You're not the Rudy Astria I know."

I frowned at Aryandor's words.

"Do you know me?"

This was certainly a guy I had never met face to face.

Yet, his words were inexplicably incongruent.

"What are you to say whether I am right or wrong?"

I spoke, manipulating my mana.

Aryandor locked eyes with me.

"I might know more about you than you think. However…"

Aryandor tilted his head slightly.

The slight tilt of his expressionless head gave off a slightly eerie vibe.

It felt like he was peering through me.

"The current you is completely different. Not the Rudy Astria I've seen."

It didn’t seem like he was referring to my current form being from the future.

It felt like he was indicating that I was possessed.

He didn’t seem to have precisely figured out the fact of 'possession', but it appeared he had somewhat caught on.

At least when he harbored such doubts, I had to inflict some damage, somehow.

"Spatial Slash."

I cast the spell at a rapid pace.

Upon my casting, Aryandor's eyes widened.

A large slice appeared in the space where Aryandor was.

Seeing this, Aryandor bent his body significantly.

Even if a slice was made, it took time for the space to be severed.

Of course, that time wasn’t long, but Aryandor was able to avoid the slash by moving in that brief moment.

"Space… magic?"

He seemed to have just caught on now, even though I had used space magic just a moment ago.

Aryandor looked at me, seemingly bewildered.

"Who are you?"

I kindly responded to Aryandor's question.

"I'm Rudy Astria."

Upon hearing my response, Aryandor furrowed his brow.

"This is absurd."

Aryandor seemed puzzled, and I too found the situation strange.

What exactly does this guy know?

When thinking about it, since it involves time magic, he should be able to know about the past and future.

However, seeing Aryandor's reaction, I couldn't help but feel perplexed.

He doesn’t know me.

It seemed like he knew Rudy Astria before my soul took over the body.

But what was it about Rudy Astria before I took over that led him to come here for me like this?

The Rudy Astria I knew wasn’t a talent that the rebels would covet.

Certainly not worth mobilizing the rebels’ forces to come and fight like this.

Yet, him being here meant that he saw something.

What did he see that prompted this action?

While I was thinking, a voice rang out from afar.

"Indeed, everyone is gathered here."

A man with a patchy beard, Robert, stood there.

He was riding on the back of Behemoth, approaching us.

Robert scanned us quickly and then focused his gaze on Cromwell.

"Cromwell, you still haven’t beaten him? He looks like a greenhorn."

Irritated by Robert’s teasing, Cromwell gritted his teeth and spoke.

“…You try fighting him. He's a headache."

"I’ve already caught one."

Robert pulled up a man by the scruff of his neck.

"Hey, is this one your comrades?"

A man with severe dark circles under his eyes.

He was the one who had ridden the Bone Dragon last time.

He seemed to be unconscious or at least unable to gather his wits.

"How can you treat a necromancer like this?"

Robert looked at Aryandor with disdain as he spoke.

"The power of the rebel guys lately is no joke~ That's what I heard. It was slightly interesting, but was it all just a rumor? They said they were fighting for some great cause, but……”

At those words, Aryandor shot him a fierce look.

"Do you want your tongue cut off?"

"Oh~ scary~."

Robert mocked Aryandor with his words.

While laughing mockingly, Robert suddenly shifted the atmosphere as he began to speak.

"What kind of cause is it when you can’t even look after one person by your side. It’s almost sad for those around you."

I looked at Robert and scanned the surroundings.

The situation was hugely in our favor.

He was alone and we were numerous.

Moreover, I was in a state where I could use space magic.

It was a situation that he could never win.

From his perspective, it should be a hopeless situation.

Aryandor, glaring at Robert, shifted his gaze back towards me.

"Hmm, this is as far as I should go."

Aryandor smiled at me.

"It was a pleasure meeting you, Rudy Astria. Some unexpected events unfolded, which were somewhat startling, but it was fun in its own way."

Aryandor spoke to me as if bidding farewell.

I immediately opened my mouth upon hearing those words.

"Professor."

"I know."

Cromwell, Gracie, Robert, and I began to manipulate our mana.

It seemed like our opponent was trying to flee.

We must stop him.

It’s a prime opportunity to capture the leader of the Rebels.

"Priscilla."

I rapidly summoned Priscilla.

I judged that Priscilla would be more effective at halting the opponent's movements

than space magic.

I'm unsure how to utilize time magic, but if it's Priscilla, who can even freeze mana…

Not only that, but the other professors also used their magic.

Clearly, our magic was trying to envelope Aryandor, but he did not move.

He just smiled and slightly raised his hand.

With his hand raised, Aryandor snapped his fingers.

Click!

"Time Back."

A bright light flared, enveloping Aryandor.

Time Back.

It was a spell that rewinds time.

Although he had continually used this magic while fighting with McDowell and Cromwell, he used it this time on a different scale.

He had arranged for Jefrin to set up magical devices in advance to prepare for the spell.

From the very beginning, Aryandor had no intention of fighting seriously.

He merely intended to retrieve Rudy Astria and retreat.

Aryandor slowly opened his eyes.

Before him stood the Bone Dragon.

Next to it, in order, were Jefrin, Daemon, and Venderwood.

It was before they departed.

However, it was a dark night.

While the moment had been reset, absolute time had progressed.

Aryandor opened his mouth, observing the scene.

"We're not going to the Academy."

“Huh?”

Upon hearing this, Jefrin's eyes widened.

“Bu, but surely… just a moment ago… we were at the Academy…”

“…What?”

Aryandor, who was about to enter a building behind him, turned his head at Jefrin’s words.

Aryandor looked at Jefrin, then glanced at Daemon and Venderwood next to him.

The two also seemed to share Jefrin’s surprise, their faces showing astonishment.

Even though time was rewound, they all retained their memories.

Something that should not have happened.

Aryandor turned his head again, gazing at Jefrin.

“Jefrin, how were the magical devices set up?”

"What? I did as you instructed, exactly…”

Aryandor frowned.

Although time seemed to have been rewound correctly, the fact that their memories remained intact meant something went wrong with the devices.

Time magic was a magic fraught with loopholes.

Even now, time hasn't reverted correctly.

While the time they originally departed was during sunset, it was now deep into the night.

In reality, the duration they spent there had already passed.

Everyone outside the Academy experienced time as usual.

However, for those inside the Academy, only their timeline had been altered.

To be precise, the events during that span seemed to have been erased.

But for some reason, the magical device had not activated properly.

While things like their physical locations were reset, their memories remained intact.

This meant…

The people of the Academy would remember this.

Including his abilities and the abilities of the people in front of him.

Of course, he had not revealed all of his abilities, but still, he had displayed most of them.

“Sigh……”

Aryandor clasped his head and let out a sigh.

Then Jefrin, unable to stand still, looked at Aryandor anxiously.

"I-I'm so sorry! It must've been a mistake on my part… My apologies…”

“No. It’s okay.”

Aryandor sighed and spoke to Jefrin.

"It's my fault for not accounting for the variables."

Aryandor said that and then looked at the others.

"Take a good rest. I'm heading in as well."

With those words, Aryandor walked into the building.

Aryandor went into his room and clutched his head.

His initial plan was to manipulate Rudy Astria, retain only their shared memories, and reverse time.

After that, he intended to utilize Rudy Astria at the academy.

But not only was the Rudy Astria at the academy a different person than he remembered, but the magic also didn't execute properly.

If only the time-reversal spell worked correctly, he wouldn't have been this frustrated.

Knock, knock, knock…

Then, there was a knock on Aryandor’s door.

"Come in."

Then, Jefrin slowly entered his room.

"I… I apologize."

Aryandor shook his head.

"No, it was my mistake. Don't worry, go and rest."

Jefrin, having faced continuous failures since the North, felt shameful in Aryandor's presence.

However, Jefrin had something to bring up.

"I… but…”

"Hmm?"

"As I was going around installing the magic tool… I saw a boy."

"A boy?"

At Jefrin’s words, Aryandor furrowed his brow.

"Yes, a boy… seemingly overwhelmed by feelings of inferiority and defeat."

Jefrin, a wizard who uses hallucination-type magic, was extremely sensitive to people's emotions.

"But, as far as I know, that boy surely isn’t one who would be like that…”

"What?"

"The boy who you said was the most dangerous… that boy was like that."

“…Evan?"

Aryandor's eyes widened.

"Yes, that was his name."

Aryandor stared at Jefrin for a moment and then slowly smiled.

"Care to elaborate?"

In a headache-inducing situation, Aryandor felt as if he'd found a glimmer of hope.

CHAPTER 142
SAINT HARUNA (10)

"What just happened……”

Evan looked around, puzzled.

He was sure that he had been in front of the training ground where people had gathered.

However, the place he was now in was his dormitory room.

He had definitely been talking to a young girl.

"You, you have very nice eyes, don't you?"

The words she said to him with a smile.

"I know your feelings very well."

"No matter how hard you try, no matter how you struggle, it seems like the gap only widens, and you feel increasingly powerless watching yourself."

"I know it very well…”

At the girl's words, Evan drew his sword.

"There's no need to be so defensive."

"My name is Jefrin."

"I can help you."

After those words, a bright light suddenly enveloped him, and it brought him to this moment.

"Jefrin……."

It was a name he'd heard somewhere before.

"Haa……."

Evan sighed while sitting on the bed.

He watched closely.

The sight of Rudy, standing proudly with the professors.

While all the students were evacuating, Rudy boldly confronted the enemy with the professors.

Something he himself could not do.

Rudy was bravely doing all of those things.

Perhaps it was natural to feel powerless.

In fact, he thought it might be arrogant to consider himself a rival to Rudy Astria.

"Was it a dream?"

However, it was too vivid to be a dream.

Too vivid…….

So……. was it reality?

"No……. I……."

It was Evan, who confidently held the top position at Liberion.

There wasn't a significant difference between him and Rudy Astria in the last exam.

He still had the upper hand.

At least for now…

1st floor of the academy main building, in front of the entrance.

"Huh?"

Rie opened her eyes with a confused face.

Where she was supposed to be was……

Rie looked beside her.

"Hmm?"

Next to her, Yuni was making a puzzled face.

"What's going on?"

Yuni tilted her head, looking at her body up and down.

Despite having certainly been pierced through the abdomen, Yuni’s body was now perfectly fine.

"Y-Yuni?"

“……Hmm? Sis?"

Yuni, who had been staring intently at her stomach, lifted her head to look at Rie.

"What's this? Where are we? Did I have a dream?"

Yuni said, tilting her head.

The Yuni who had been trembling in fear just moments before was gone, and only the usual Yuni was there.

Rie narrowed her brows and said,

"Yuni, is your stomach okay?"

"Huh?"

At Rie’s words, Yuni touched where she had been pierced through before.

"What? Isn’t this a dream?"

When Rie mentioned her stomach, it felt like being pierced through had really happened.

However, with her stomach being fine, she could only be puzzled.

As she pondered, Yuni clapped her hands and spoke.

"Is this, like, the afterlife or something?"

Yuni, who had been tilting her head in thought, narrowed her eyes and glared at Rie.

"If this is the afterlife, did you die too, sis?"

"What?"

Confused, Rie made a baffled expression at Yuni's words.

However, Yuni, unbothered by it, heaved a sigh.

"I told you to leave me and run away, didn’t I?! You struggled again because of your weird obstinacy! Really……”

"Huh?"

"Really, since a while back! When there's an easy way, just take it! Why do you always choose the hard way! That's why this happened!"

Yuni spoke to Rie as if scolding her.

"I'm relieved."

Hearing those words, Rie, smiling a weary smile, tightly hugged Yuni, who was in front of her.

Yuni, suddenly being hugged by Rie, opened her eyes wide.

"What, what is it!"

Yuni struggled in Rie's embrace with a surprised face.

"Just stay still."

Rie held Yuni tightly, preventing her from moving.

After struggling for a moment, Yuni smiled at Rie’s words and buried her face in Rie’s chest.

“It feels like it’s been a while since I’ve hugged sis…… it’s nice to hug sis since we died~.”

Yuni spoke to Rie, who had suddenly hugged her, in a teasing manner.

As she spoke, Yuni felt something strange.

The clothes of Rie, who was holding her.

They were definitely the uniform of Liberion Academy.

“……But, do you normally wear the same clothes when you die?"

Something was strange.

Yuni slightly moved away from Rie's embrace and looked around.

"The place too… seems familiar?"

Anyone who looked at the surroundings would recognize it as Liberion Academy.

“Huh?”

Rie, having somewhat regained her senses, also looked around.

"Why am I here?"

"What is this!!"

Then, a noisy sound came from the surroundings.

Students, looking around with surprised voices.

Their reactions were similar to theirs.

Then a voice echoed through the academy.

[Students, this is Professor Mcguire. The situation you just saw was real, and we are currently assessing it. We will inform you immediately once we understand what has happened. That is all.]

Professor Mcguire's magic echoed the sound around them.

"What is it?"

Rie frowned as she spoke.

At that moment, the sound of hurried footsteps rushing into the academy’s main building could be heard.

It was Professor Gracie.

“Uh, Professor?”

Professor Gracie turned her head for a moment at Yuni's voice.

"Oh, oh! Yuni! Sorry, I'm in a hurry right now!"

Yuni grabbed the back of Gracie, who was about to run away in a hurry.

Gracie, whose clothes were being held, opened her eyes wide.

"Huh, Yuni? I'm busy right now!"

Gracie, whose clothes were grabbed by Yuni, flusteredly spoke.

Holding the back of the professor's clothes tightly might be considered impolite, but

Gracie made a face as if she wanted to be sent quickly, not caring about such matters.

"Yuni, I'm really…”

"Yuni."

Rie pulled Yuni away from Professor Gracie.

Yuni, grabbed by the neck by Rie, tilted her head while looking at her sister.

"Sister?"

"Thank you, Rie! Then I'll!"

This time, when Professor Gracie tried to go, Rie held onto her.

"Gah!"

Startled, Professor Gracie looked at Rie with surprise as she was grabbed again.

"I didn’t say you could go, did I?"

Rie spoke to Professor Gracie with a sly smile.

After all, Gracie was the most manageable professor compared to the others.

So, she couldn’t just let her go.

She needed to understand the situation, after all.

Gracie mumbled quietly, making a sullen face.

"Why are you doing this to me……..”

Rie asked with a smile.

"What happened? Why are we like this?"

Professor Gracie hesitated for a moment, then quietly opened her mouth.

"Well, it's complicated to explain……”

Rie slightly tilted her head.

Professor Gracie, thinking she would find out anyway, opened her mouth.

"I’m not sure if you'll believe me, but it seems like time has reverted. For now, I think we need to discuss the exact details among the professors… Can you let go of this?"

Gracie spoke to Rie as if coaxing a child.

Rie nodded as if she understood and let go of the clothes.

"Thank you."

"Yes, yes! See you later!"

Gracie started to run again.

"Time?"

Rie murmured to herself, furrowing her brow slightly.

Come to think of it, right now was before she went to have tea with Yuni.

The students around them too……

Rie took Yuni's hand.

"Yuni, will you follow me for a moment?"

"Yep!"

Yuni smiled cheerfully and spoke when Rie took her hand.

So, the two hand-in-hand arrived at the student council room.

"Rudy, are you there?"

Surely, if it was the situation when they were going for tea, Rudy should have been in the student council room.

Rudy went to meet the leader of the rebels after being with her.

She thought he might know something.

However, someone else was in the student council room.

"Hm? Who is it?"

"Huh?"

A girl wearing a nun's outfit.

"The Saint?"

But something was off.

Her eyes were vacant.

As if they were empty.

"Ah, is it you, Rie?"

But that cheeky way of speaking.

It was undoubtedly the Saint, Haruna.

"Why are you here?"

Rie spoke, her eyes wide.

After a moment of contemplation, Haruna tilted her head and opened her mouth.

"Hmm… There must be a reason, right?"

"……"

She sighed at the Saint, who made an incomprehensible statement.

This was how she had been speaking last time too.

Thus, she thought there was no point in continuing the conversation.

“By the way, wasn’t Rudy here?”

“Ah, may I ask a question first?”

Rie slightly furrowed her brow at Haruna’s continual deflections, a vein almost popping on her forehead, but she managed to keep her composure.

“……What is it.”

“Could it be, has time reversed?”

“What?”

Caught off guard by Haruna’s sudden statement, Rie's eyes widened.

For now, she didn’t understand Haruna’s intentions.

So she thought it was right to conceal it.

“No, I……”

“Yes, that’s right.”

When Rie hesitated, Yuni spoke up.

“Yu, Yuni?”

“What’s the use of hiding it? This isn’t important, right? So, where did Rudy go?”

Haruna smiled.

“If time has reversed…… he might be in a different place. Don’t worry, he’ll be here soon.”

“……A different place? Did he go to see the professors?”

Rie spoke, frowning at the incomprehensible statement.

However, Haruna simply smiled kindly and shook her head.

“No, a different place.”

Haruna gently touched her rosary.

“He went to witness how the best decisions can sometimes yield the worst outcomes.”

“…What?”

I opened my eyes.

I remembered a blinding light enveloping me.

Along with the words 'Time Back.'

Thinking about the term 'Time Back,' it seemed like magic that reversed time.

So, he would have used it to avoid my attack and that of the professors.

“But……”

I looked around.

“Where is this?”

A ruined academy stretched before me.

What I saw before I obtained my future body……

The world where I possess the strongest power.

A world where everyone is dead.

That world was right before my eyes.

CHAPTER 143
SAINT HARUNA (11)

The scent of char filled the air.

As I stepped on the crumbled debris on the ground, a strange feeling arose within me.

"Why am I here?"

I scowled, glancing around.

This place is the future.

Memories of the actions of my future self surface in my mind.

Everyone in this world is dead.

From those I was close to like Luna, Rie, and Astina, to Professors Robert, Cromwell, and Gracie.

Everyone in the academy is dead.

However, those outside the academy survived.

We won the battle.

But, can this truly be called victory?

Tap… Tap…

I gaze up at the sky.

"It’s raining."

Raindrops fall, touching my head.

With the rain, amidst the ruined buildings, I stand alone at the center.

It was a pitiful sight.

I can't imagine what it would feel like for my future self.

If after defeating the enemy, all that remains are ruins…

If everyone is dead and you are left alone,

Even without experiencing it, my heart aches just thinking about it.

"Why… did it end up like this?"

It's confusing.

The scenes play in my head, but what I was thinking while fighting doesn't come to mind.

Just vague emotion surfaces.

Hatred.

A hot fury surges in my chest.

A colossal rage towards Aryandor, the leader of the Rebels, filled my heart.

Of course, this emotion is merely felt indirectly.

It's like reading a book.

It doesn't strongly resonate with me.

I know Aryandor must be eliminated, but when asked if he's the object of hatred, I can only tilt my head.

However, as I process information about my future self, hatred gradually emerges.

How did this happen?

Where did it start to go wrong?

All the situations draw themselves in my head.

“Astina…?”

Astina's death.

She died a year before this fight, this final battle, by Aryandor’s hand.

That's what the memories inside me showed.

My future self walked a path almost identical to mine.

From the time I possessed this body to now, the path is nearly identical.

But, after Astina’s death, my future self became completely different from my current self.

During my second year winter break, Astina was killed by Aryandor.

That's the timeline of this world.

After Astina died, my future self resolved,

I must become stronger.

I must become stronger to protect everyone.

Although it might seem like a similar thought to my current self, it was a vow of a slightly different shape.

In the future, I began to grow stronger by any means necessary.

After Astina's death, the future me directly went to the Astria family.

And I pushed Ian out.

I ousted Ian without hesitation, took over the family, and not only that, I began to seize all the powers around me.

In this process, the people around me were neglected.

I moved forward no matter what others did.

I thought it would be fine as long as I protected everyone.

However, the result of doing so turned out like this.

While I was dealing with other people… while defeating other enemies… everyone died.

The people at the academy couldn’t hold out.

It was an absurd result.

No matter how strong I became, there was nothing I could do when multiple enemies appeared in different places.

And after everything ended.

The future me decided.

To go back.

To forget all this and return to my original life, where I should be.

“……I'm going back."

As I mumbled to myself, a voice came.

"You're going back in the end, huh."

"Ah…… Priscilla?"

A silver wolf revealed itself behind me.

It was Priscilla.

"It's been a long time since we've had a conversation like this."

Priscilla spoke to me in a somewhat bitter tone.

Now, I knew why Priscilla reacted that way.

The abilities I had when Astina died were not much different from now.

Of course, they were a little more developed, but the range of the abilities were the same.

When Astina was in danger, I entrusted Astina to Priscilla and went to fight Aryandor.

Of course, the result was defeat.

There was no way I could beat Aryandor.

The result not only gave me a sense of defeat.

The defeat took Astina away from me.

Seeing Astina's death like that, I couldn't stand still.

I felt a feeling of revulsion towards myself who had barely survived.

My mind was nowhere near sane.

Eventually, all arrows of resentment pointed at Priscilla, and it seemed like Priscilla and I became estranged.

Priscilla stared at me intently and quietly opened her mouth.

"What on earth happened earlier?"

The fight with Aryandor.

Priscilla couldn't understand what happened.

But I also questioned the surprisingly calm demeanor of Priscilla.

In the memories of my future self…

It felt like I said something I shouldn’t have.

Priscilla appeared nonchalant, gazing at me without concern.

Well, it was easier for me if Priscilla came out with this attitude.

It was much better than awkwardness.

"Hmm…”

I gazed intently at Priscilla, pondering.

Where should I begin explaining…

As I was thinking, Priscilla spoke first.

“It's fine. It's not the first time I've failed to understand your actions."

With that, Priscilla looked straight at me.

“You look better than I thought, though. Have you come to some realization… or… Sigh… Whatever. If you're going to go back, go back quickly.”

I tilted my head slightly at Priscilla’s words.

“Go back where?”

“Didn’t you say you would go back once everything is done? To the world you were living in.”

“…What?”

What did the me in this world… do, exactly?

To be honest, even though various memories existed in my head, it felt as if they were pages in a book, so I couldn't know everything.

I could only read down through the parts I wanted.

I pondered over the phrase ‘going back.’

Then, a particular magic came to mind.

A space magic that the future me could use.

This wasn't just a simple teleportation spell.

That's what my future knowledge told me.

“Could it be…”

I began to channel mana.

Brushing my damp hair, soaked from the rain, aside, I reached my hand forward.

“Portal… create…”

Then, a small vortex began to form in front of me.

The black swirl gradually widened, and a small gap began to emerge.

The dark space, dim from the rain, began to brighten with the light emanating from the small gap.

“Ah…”

Beyond the portal, a familiar scenery peeked through.

Tall, modern buildings.

A clear sky.

Numerous cars moving along the roads.

…It was Earth.

“…I can actually go back?"

I stared at the landscape in disbelief.

Priscilla, watching me, spoke.

“Yeah, so go on. I pray you never experience such events again."

“Priscilla?”

I turned my head and looked at Priscilla.

Priscilla bowed her head to me.

"On behalf of the world, I thank you. You were a hero."

I blankly stared at her solemn farewell.

Clearly, the future me had saved the world.

But I hadn't saved the people of the academy.

How would I have felt receiving this gratitude here, in the future?

With my friends and teachers dead, and nothing left, I return to Earth after a farewell from the one I fought with.

I hear the words that I am a hero.

How would it feel?

I felt like being in this place might not be a good thing for my future self.

I couldn't say anything as I looked at Priscilla, who was still bowing her head.

"Priscilla……”

Still, I thought that the remaining person needed as much consideration as possible.

"You really worked hard too. I’m going to leave now, so take care."

Saying so, I headed towards the portal.

As I stepped towards the portal, a bright light enveloped me.

"Huh?"

"Rudy……?"

Upon opening my eyes, Rie, Yuni, and the saint, Haruna, were in front of me.

The student council room of the Academy.

It seemed like I had returned to reality.

“Ugh……”

Suddenly, dizziness struck me, and I vomited.

“Rudy!”

Rie rushed toward me with a startled expression.

Then, Haruna laughed.

Rie, supporting me, looked at Haruna.

"Hey! What's happening…!"

“You may feel dizzy for a moment. It will pass soon, so don’t worry.”

Haruna cut off Rie’s words, as if she knew she would say that.

I regained some of my senses and lifted my head.

And, surveying the surroundings, I spoke.

“……What happened?"

“Uh…… I want to ask that.”

Rie, while supporting me, who was about to collapse, seated me in a chair.

Seated, I looked at everyone.

"Yuni……? Are you…… okay?"

Yuni, who was surely injured before, was perfectly fine in front of me.

Yuni, folding her arms and looking at me indifferently, said,

“……You seem to be in a worse condition than me.”

That was true.

I felt nauseous and dizzy, and my mind wasn’t fully clear.

Still, I could manage a conversation.

"Time has gone back."

Haruna uttered abruptly.

It was brief, but no further explanation was needed.

"Ti…… me."

It was roughly as I expected.

I had had a rough idea since Aryandor mentioned Time Back.

I nodded and threw out a question.

"So, why did I go there?"

"Aryandor only turned back time, and you went back to the future because you were inside your future self."

"So your eyes. Time has gone back, so why are your eyes in that condition."

“I didn’t merely lose my sight. I violated a taboo, and so I received that punishment.”

“……Wait a minute."

Rie interrupted my conversation with Haruna.

“……I can’t follow the conversation, what’s going on?”

Rie spoke, placing a hand on her temple as if asking what on earth we were talking about.

Also, Yuni next to us looked at Rie with a bright smile.

"Oh, me too. I thought I was the only one who didn’t know, but it seems not."

“No, that…… sigh……”

Rie glared at me.

I awkwardly smiled back at her gaze.

“Why……”

"You, I ask only one question."

Rie, placed her hand on the desk and leaned close, opening her mouth.

"You had time to explain to me, and you didn't, or you couldn't."

"I couldn't… I just heard about this situation too…”

Rie stared at me intently.

I gave her the most pitiful, unjustly accused expression I could muster.

“……Really?"

"Really."

Rie stared at me hard and then sighed.

"Ha… okay, I got it. Then explain everything when this is over."

"Of course."

I smiled at Rie and turned my gaze back to Haruna.

There was something I was most curious about.

"How much have you interfered in my life?"

Haruna knows everything.

From the fact that I am a possessor, to the events of the future.

She was the one who knew all of it.

So, has that person been playing with the world and me from the start to the end?

Then Haruna quietly opened her mouth.

"I've done exactly two things."

Haruna smiled as she spoke.

"One was telling Astina about your future, and the other is what I just did. It applies to the present, the future, and any time."

Haruna spat out meaningful words and laughed.

CHAPTER 144
THE EVE OF THE STORM…! (1)

"It's a nice day."

"Indeed, the weather is lovely."

I shaded my eyes with my hand and looked up at the sky.

Next to me, Priscilla clung closely like a puppy.

I gently stroked Priscilla's head as she sat beside me.

"You've been so busy that you couldn't summon me, what's the occasion?"

"No matter how busy, one must take breaks now and then."

The reason for such leisure was because Homecoming Day had been canceled.

The preparations for Homecoming Day were already complete, and essentially, since time had been reversed, there were no issues at the academy, but Vice Principal Cromwell boldly canceled it.

Homecoming Day was a venue for bonding between juniors and seniors.

Also, it was an event where graduates returned to the academy to see the faces of their professors.

However, after experiencing an attack from the rebels, neither students nor professors could possibly enjoy such an event.

The graduates might be disappointed, but holding the event despite that all that would be problematic.

Perhaps Cromwell thought the same, as he boldly canceled the event.

"Indeed, the professors must be busy as well……”

The attack by the rebels and the reversing of time.

All of these events were known not only to those inside the academy but also publicized throughout the entire empire.

The Emperor and numerous nobles were furious, and orders to apprehend the rebels were issued across the empire.

Though they spoke of capture, it was essentially a kill-on-sight order.

Even the fragmented empire had united like this because the academy had been messed with.

So, the professors at the academy began to pass information about the rebel leaders to the empire.

Daemon, who uses necromancy.

Jefrin, who utilized illusion magic.

Venderwood, who could regenerate infinitely.

Aryandor, the swordsman who used time magic.

Portraits of these individuals were drawn and distributed across the empire.

I wondered if there was any point to this.

Could they really be caught just by searching for them?

Having faced them, I knew their power well and was fully aware that they could not be caught by ordinary means.

However, seeing the empire unite over this issue made it seem like a not-so-bad situation.

"Now, I suppose it's just up to me to do well……”

With a slightly disheartened smile, I stroked Priscilla's head.

Priscilla smiled comfortably, seemingly pleased.

"Well then, I'll leave this part to Professor Mcguire."

"Okay. What else?"

"Yes… there's the matter of repairing the training grounds…"

Kuhn glanced slightly as he reported to Rie.

"…Don't worry about her."

This place was clearly the student council room.

However, a girl who wasn't part of the student council lay on the room's sofa, giving Kuhn a slight glare.

"Hmm~ It seems like it's about time to wrap this up~."

The girl, lounging on the couch with cat-like grace, was Yuni.

Yuni slightly adjusted her position and spoke.

"Sis seems a bit tired~."

Yuni's tone was subtly teasing.

Kuhn briefly glanced at Rie.

"I'm not tired. Keep reporting."

"Yes, then……"

"Hey! Just leave it to him and play with me!"

Yuni spoke to Rie, pouting her lips.

She was whining like a little child.

“Ahem……”

Kuhn coughed awkwardly at Yuni’s typical behavior.

It felt as if he was intruding on a family conversation.

“Sigh.”

Although Rie sighed, the corners of her lips twitched upward slightly.

It didn’t seem like she minded Yuni’s playful whining.

“I'll play with you tomorrow, so go home for today.”

Hearing those words, Yuni’s lips curled into a grin.

“Is it a promise?”

“Yes.”

Seeming pleased with Rie’s response, Yuni exited the student council room with a spring in her step.

“Alright, let’s continue……”

As soon as Yuni closed the door behind her, it opened again.

“What’s up with her?”

Rudy entered the student council room, looking in the direction Yuni had disappeared to.

“Oh, Rudy, you're here?”

Rie greeted Rudy with a smile.

It was a casual, everyday sort of greeting.

“Is there any problem with the work?”

“Nah, now that Homecoming Day is gone, there's pretty much nothing to do.”

“Did the professors say anything?”

“Nope. I think we can just keep doing what we were doing?”

As Rudy moved to his place, Rie passed him some documents without a word, and Rudy accepted them as if it were a matter of course.

Kuhn just stared blankly at the two of them.

“What? Is something wrong?”

“No…… Then, I’ll continue the report.”

And so, Kuhn resumed his report.

Rudy did his work, and Rie listened to Kuhn’s report.

“……Umm?”

“Huh? Ah, go on.”

Kuhn continued his report, sweat beading on his forehead.

“Hmm……”

Rie, however, seemed lost in thought.

Although Rie had been focused and asking various questions while Yuni was there, now she was neither looking at the documents nor at Kuhn.

At the end of Rie’s gaze was Rudy.

Kuhn couldn’t help but feel bewildered.

Even though he had sensed a strange atmosphere between these two before, it felt like that level of tension could exist between any man and woman.

However, now it felt entirely different.

It wasn’t usually like this, but whenever the two were working together separately, Rie seemed to malfunction.

Continuing to stare blankly, and quite openly, she just kept gazing at Rudy.

Her face seemed to be immersed in some profound contemplation.

This situation began after Rie visited the Royal palace.

Due to the rebel invasion incident, Rie and Yuni had both visited the Royal palace together.

Although it was officially a situation report called by the Emperor, it was a well-known fact that he called them after hearing that the two princesses had encountered some unpleasant incidents.

After the two princesses visited the Royal palace, Rie and Yuni became quite close.

However, something about Rie's state was…

“…strange."

Kuhn, thinking further discussion would be pointless, roughly summarized and moved on.

However, Rie, perhaps unaware that the conversation had ended, continued to stare at Rudy.

Kuhn cautiously opened his mouth.

“…Senior?"

"Hm?"

Rie, startled, turned to look at Kuhn.

"Ah, oh, right. Good job. Continue handling it that way."

Rie offered a casual smile and brushed it off.

“…I will take my leave then."

Kuhn, thinking that stepping back might help the two, retreated for the moment.

"…? Alright, good job."

Rie offered a puzzled face and a greeting as she watched Kuhn hastily disappear.

Rie didn't understand why Kuhn vanished so quickly.

She hadn’t fully realized that she had been staring at Rudy.

There was a specific reason why Rie was gazing at Rudy so blankly.

The conversation she'd had at the Royal palace.

Rie had talked a lot with her father.

About how Yuni had almost died.

About how Yuni had thrown herself in harm's way for her.

That conversation had taken place, and there was also a discussion about how Rudy had saved them both.

Talking so openly with her father after so long felt good.

It felt like she was talking to a father, not the emperor who ruled the empire.

Having such a conversation, Yuni, with a smile, said to Rie,

-I don't want to be anything like an emperor. Sis, you can do all that.

Rie was greatly surprised by Yuni's words.

Yuni, who had been competing with her for the throne all this while.

Despite having many deficiencies compared to Rie, the effort and study Yuni put in to

attain the emperor's position had always been genuine.

Thus, hearing Yuni willingly relinquish the throne was nothing but shocking.

-I don’t think that position suits me.

A relief was visible on Yuni's face as she spoke with a smile.

Although it wasn't an official declaration, it felt like she had shaken something off by telling Rie.

-So. Starting today, we’re going to get along even better. Now, not as competitors, but as sisters!

Rie smiled at Yuni, who spoke thus.

Through their conversation, Yuni and Rie resolved various misunderstandings.

Misunderstandings that have been followed since childhood.

Rie, who faced harassment opposing the noble faction, and Yuni, who nonchalantly sided with the noble faction because it was convenient.

Yuni simply accepted them because things were bothersome and tough.

The misunderstanding that accumulated between Rie and Yuni was entirely because of the noble faction.

The noble faction pitted Rie and Yuni against each other, creating a confrontational structure.

Once such misunderstandings were resolved, the relationship between Rie and Yuni strengthened.

Thus, after concluding with Yuni, Rie faced the Emperor alone.

Although she was a bit bewildered when the Emperor suddenly called only her, she met with the Emperor alone as it was her father's call.

And the words of the Emperor:

-Uh… my daughter…

-So… are you… dating that Rudy Astria?

-How about thinking about marriage?

Because of these words, Rie kept thinking.

While Rudy was reading documents, he felt a gaze and lifted his head.

When he looked to the side, Rie was staring at him intently.

Rudy looked at Rie with a puzzled face.

“…What are you doing?"

"Hmm…?"

Rie, suddenly realizing Rudy was calling her, snapped to attention.

"Ah…”

Realizing she had been blankly staring at Rudy, Rie blushed.

"Oh, it's nothing! Nothing at all!"

Rie stood up abruptly from her seat and shouted.

"Ah… okay."

Rudy nodded his head with a puzzled face at Rie’s intense reaction.

Somehow, that reaction was even more embarrassing.

Rie turned her head and tightly closed her lips, frowning.

However, on one hand, she continued her thoughts.

-How about thinking about marriage?

She recalled the Emperor's words.

CHAPTER 145
THE EVE OF THE STORM…! (2)

"It was all in vain."

Astina let out a rueful smile as she read the letter.

It was a letter about the Saint Haruna.

Astina had gone to great lengths to gather information about the Saint, but by the time she had done so, matters regarding Haruna had already concluded.

The Haruna that Astina had discovered was just an ordinary girl.

A common girl that could be found in any empire.

However, it is said that she changed after meeting the former saint, Beatrice.

"Rudy was called here by… the former saint…"

That's what was written in the letter to Rudy.

There was not much written about the depth of the matter.

Such content was not something to casually discuss in a letter.

The exact reason was that too much other information was written down.

But, there was one point that lifted her spirits as she read a bit of the content.

"No one else knows…"

A content smile appeared on Astina's face.

The start of the letter, which discussed Haruna, felt somewhat disappointing.

Only Astina had come to know the fact that Rudy was a possessor.

Astina had seen several scenes by entering Rudy's dreams.

Sceneries that could never be seen in this world.

Scenes that she could not even imagine.

Such scenes were secrets known only to Rudy and herself.

Stories that could not be shared with anyone.

No one would believe such stories even if they were told.

However, she had gone directly into Rudy’s dreams and learned about this.

She had seen a different side of Rudy and had also witnessed strange food and culture.

It felt like a precious secret just between the two of them.

Astina thought this fact had come to light through his meeting with Haruna and felt a pang of sadness.

But seeing that even Rie and Luna weren't told made her chuckle.

"Oh, really…”

Astina tapped her cheek.

It was to prevent a constantly forming silly smile.

"Well… aside from this…”

In order to divert her mind slightly, Astina read through the other content of the letter.

However, the remaining content did not seem so important.

She already knew the information that the leader of the rebels, Aryandor, seemed to

have turned back time, thanks to the information received from the capital.

Truly crucial details were omitted from the letter.

"This letter feels a bit lacking…”

Most of it outlined the flow of events that had occurred, but the important details were missing.

"Well, it doesn't matter."

Astina muttered to herself as she stood up from her chair.

"Where… will you go?"

The maid in front of her asked cautiously as Astina rose from her seat.

"It's about time to go back."

Astina said with a smile.

The semester was nearing its end.

It was time for Astina to return to the academy.

Although the final exams for the first semester were not held yet, Astina had a reason to return to the Academy a bit early.

Astina spoke as she glanced at the calendar.

A day marked with a star on the calendar with the schedule, but without any specific details.

It was Rudy's birthday.

Astina couldn't forget the embarrassment from Rudy's last birthday.

Luna and Rie had unexpectedly joined them for a meal, adding to her humiliation.

And yet, Rudy didn’t celebrate her birthday.

Astina's birthday was in winter.

Though she was away during winter break and couldn't help it, she was still disappointed.

"Shall we go then?"

With a grand plan in mind, Astina started heading towards the Academy.

The scent of chemicals filled the research lab.

Poles responsible for holding the staffs were scattered around, and various documents and mana stones were also strewn about.

If one were to sell the materials scattered here, it would be enough for a commoner to eat and live for three generations, given their value.

"Hmm……”

While the scattered items were valuable, the environment inside was stifling and oppressive.

This place was the Alchemy Department's laboratory.

The room, where stacked items blocked the windows preventing proper sunlight, was a lab.

Yet, there was a person cheerfully laughing and researching.

Her laughing was to a degree where others might wonder if she wasn’t insane, as she was in such a good mood.

"Luna… are you struggling these days by any chance?"

"Eh?"

Ena asked Luna, who was happily laughing.

Luna tilted her head with a puzzled expression.

Recently, every day had been joyous for Luna.

Of course, there were bad incidents like the rebel attack.

However, that incident turned out to be a bit of a good thing for Luna.

The magical tool that Luna had secured.

The incident where she stole that magical tool that Jefrin had installed.

That incident had a huge impact on Luna and everyone else.

In a very good way.

The reason why everyone didn't lose their memories.

It was because Luna had stolen Jefrin's magical tool.

When time reversed for everyone in the academy, only Luna remained unaffected.

Because she held that magical tool.

Of course, Luna did not intend this, but when Professor Mcguire disassembled the tool, it turned out to have that capability.

They were still determining exactly what abilities the tool had.

However, Mcguire was certain that the tool was related to time magic.

Specifically, it was a tool related to the mental aspect of time magic.

That was the magical tool Luna had stolen.

The truth was that time had reversed, and everyone was left puzzled.

Why did people's memories remain?

The magical tool that Luna had snuck away provided a clear answer.

Luna, who hadn’t even fought, became the biggest contributor to the Rebel incident.

While Luna was pleased with this, in reality, this was a very minor matter.

The reason Luna was smiling was due to an earlier event.

The time Rudy threw a question that seemed like a confession.

When he finally said he would answer later.

That was the biggest reason that made Luna smile.

This also made Luna anxious.

What if Rudy simply apologizes and ends it?

However, amidst this anxiety, she thought more about what it would be like if Rudy accepted.

"Hehehe… No, I have to quickly finish the task Rudy asked me to do."

"Hmm…”

Ena never expected such a thing.

Even though Ena knew Luna well, she didn’t know much about Rudy.

It was unimaginable that the usually stoic Rudy would say such things.

Of course, Ena, who occasionally says positive things to Luna, thought that it was still a positive event when she saw him feeding Rie.

But she couldn't think of this as a positive thing.

"Luna…”

Looking at Luna, Ena wore a pitiful expression.

To the unknowing Ena, it seemed like Luna was trying her best to be positive.

Rudy, that guy, was always with Rie while working in the student council, and Luna seemed to be left behind.

After hearing about the rebel incident, didn't they say Rudy saved Rie and Yuni?

Rudy, who saved not only Rie but also Rie's family… there was no way this was flowing in a good direction.

"Luna… I'm always on your side…"

Upon hearing Ena's bitter words, Luna tilted her head.

"…Huh?"

Luna, who knew nothing, just smiled warmly.

"I'm always on your side too, Ena!"

"Uh…"

Seeing Luna like that made Ena feel even more pitiful.

Holding such a pitiful heart, Ena, while on the verge of tears, lifted her head.

"Riku…!!!"

"Hm?"

"Where did Riku go! She definitely said she was going to bring tea and snacks earlier!!"

"…Ena?"

Right now, Luna and Ena were in the midst of conducting a staff research led by Rudy.

Riku was not originally needed for that research but…

-Don't leave me out!!!

However, feeling unjust about doing different work alone, she ended up participating in the research.

For no pay, of course.

Then, the door to the research room opened.

Riku, with a broad smile, held a bundle of snacks in both hands.

"Hey, guys! I brought snacks!"

"Riku!! Why are you so late!!"

“…Huh?"

"Luna must be hungry since she has to use mana!!"

Luna was in the process of combining her staff and a mana stone.

An act that consumes a lot of mana.

It was certainly a valid point.

"Ah… so… I tried to be… as quick… as possible…?"

"You should bring it faster! Hey! When I do that kind of thing, I run so fast you can’t even see my feet!!"

"Ho, how can you not see your feet…”

"That means you should try harder! Try! Eehhh?"

Ena, with her hands on her hips, spoke to Riku.

Poor Riku was the target of Ena's venting.

Riku, not understanding the situation, stared at Ena with a bewildered face.

"Ahaha…”

Luna, observing this scene, awkwardly chuckled while scratching her cheek.

Thus, Riku, in the midst of being the target of Ena's ire, sat down in a corner.

"Hmmph……”

Once Ena’s venting was done, a girl peeked her face into the lab.

"Oh, everyone's here?"

"Yuni…! Ena is bullying me…!!"

Riku, with a crying face, threw herself into Yuni’s arms.

"Hmm? Ena did?"

"Yes…! Ena did…!"

"It’s okay~ It’s okay~."

Yuni patted the back of Riku, who nestled into her arms.

Riku and Yuni.

While they seemed an unlikely pair, they surprisingly matched and they had been getting along well lately.

Recently, Luna and her group were assisting with the staff that Rudy had requested help with, and since Yuni was in charge of the mana stone-related research for it, they spent a lot of time together.

"Oh! Is it snack time?"

Yuni, while comforting Riku, spotted the snacks laid out in front of her, her eyes lighting up.

"Do you want to eat with us, Yuni?"

"Of course~."

When Luna asked, Yuni pushed Riku away from her embrace and walked towards Luna.

"Yu, Yuni?"

"Oh, there’s cake too?"

"Yu, Yuni??"

"Heeey! This is delicious."

"Yuni!!!"

"Riku, you should come quickly too. It’s delicious."

Nonchalantly deserting Riku, Yuni began eating cake.

CHAPTER 146
THE EVE OF THE STORM…! (3)

Kuhn had been feeling something unusual lately.

He looked at just one girl and loved only her.

It was common sense for Kuhn.

Though the empire's law allowed for multiple wives, the widespread convention was to have just one.

Being a commoner, Kuhn was naturally rooted in this convention.

Though there were nobles with multiple wives, Kuhn had never witnessed such a scene, so it felt natural to him.

"Kuhn, what are you thinking about?"

And Kuhn already had his partner.

Emily.

A girl he had grown up with since they were children.

She was like his other half.

There were times Kuhn took care of Emily, and times Emily took care of Kuhn.

The two of them would look out for each other's shortcomings like they were of one mind.

If they were to spend their lives together, Kuhn thought this kind of relationship was natural.

Humans typically view the world based on their own experiences.

Given the life Kuhn had led, it was no wonder he couldn't think any differently.

"Emily."

"Hm?"

While moving student council materials, Kuhn looked over at Emily next to him.

"Do you think Rudy Astria likes Rie?"

It was an unexpectedly innocent question, unlike the usually thoughtful Kuhn.

Emily was surprised at the sudden question but pondered it seriously.

"Uhm… judging by their interactions… but… um…"

Emily couldn't give a definite answer.

When Emily and Kuhn first saw Rudy, he was with Luna.

At first glance, they seemed like a young couple, but upon closer inspection, it wasn't the case.

Then what about Rie, who was the vice-president?

Apart from when Rudy went to the lab, he was always with Rie.

Rie was the senior that Kuhn and Emily saw most often.

Rudy and Rie seemed like very close friends.

They played playful pranks and occasionally bickered, just like good friends.

Of course, there were couples who acted like that, so it wasn't easy to just see them as friends.

Were these two in a romantic relationship?

Not exactly.

Judging by the recent atmosphere, it seemed like Rie had feelings for Rudy.

However, if one were to ask Rudy if he felt the same, the answer would likely be no.

Still, it didn't give off the impression that Rudy disliked Rie or that their relationship couldn't develop into something more.

Rie was a good colleague who filled Rudy's gaps.

While Rudy led the overall flow, she was the reliable colleague who filled in the gaps behind him.

If it were a typical relationship, one could just see them as good colleagues, but in some ways, it also looked like a wife supporting her husband.

After contemplating for a while, Emily shrugged her shoulders.

"I don't know… I really don't."

"Hmm…"

After hearing Emily's response, Kuhn nodded and murmured to himself.

"What could Rudy Astria be thinking…?"

I sat at my desk, twirling my pen, deep in thought.

I had worries about the upcoming final exams, but the current dilemma was completely different.

Astina Persia.

The fact that she would die.

Is it a good idea to tell her?

When I wrote to Astina recently, I didn't mention such a thing.

Aside from concerns about the letter's security or other thoughts, my biggest dilemma was how to convey this possible reality to Astina.

Astina is strong.

She possesses a power that is unmatched by anyone else.

It is a fact acknowledged by Professor Cromwell, the Academy, and everyone in the Empire.

But if I were to tell her about her possible death, would she survive?

Someone strong enough to kill Astina.

Aryandor.

His power was beyond imagination.

A force capable of turning back time for everyone at the Academy.

It wasn't something a typical wizard could fathom.

Someone close to the realm of the gods.

That was the conclusion reached by professors who had faced him.

In this world, it's believed that only gods can control the realm of time.

Space isn’t much different.

According to this world's creation myth, time and space were the first things created and dealt with by the gods.

Having witnessed magic of both time and space, I truly believe it's a domain of the gods.

The Astria family's position as the top ducal family of the Empire is also due to this reason.

Along with that magic, their swordsmanship skills were also outstanding.

I didn't think Astina could handle such an opponent on her own.

If they clashed, Astina's defeat seemed certain.

The best way to change this outcome?

For me to become stronger.

I may have glimpsed the future, but I didn’t know the specifics.

All I had was a vague sense of the events from memories of my future self.

Given that, I couldn't naively think of asking others for help.

I had to become stronger.

“Then…”

I looked at the papers beside me.

The gradually emerging outline of my staff.

"Will this be enough…?"

Having a staff would surely amplify my abilities, but something felt wrong.

“Can it… evolve further… Ugh…”

I sighed, setting down my pen.

There’s so much to think about.

“Still, I can’t just sit here like this.”

The final exams are fast approaching.

These exams can't be taken lightly.

The privileges given to the top student:

Access to a research lab, research funding, and even the additional provision of magic tools.

I couldn't afford to miss out on any of them.

Of course, I was somewhat concerned about Evan.

In the past, I thought that if Evan didn't grow, the academy would be annihilated.

Even when I looked into the future, I felt the same way.

The future me held the top spot and completely overshadowed Evan's growth.

Could it be that everyone died because of me?

That thought crossed my mind.

But even with these uncertainties, I moved forward.

It was already the path I had chosen.

It was already something that had happened.

So I just had to do what I needed to do right now.

That's all there was to it.

So, what should I be doing now?

"Of course, I should be preparing for the final exam…"

"Hmm…"

Just as I tried to concentrate on my book again, I heard a voice in front of me.

I lifted my head and looked forward.

"…Why are you here?"

"I came to study."

Rie stood in front of me.

I slightly furrowed my brows and looked around.

This is the academy's library.

A place bustling with people, not exactly the ideal study environment.

So, seeing Rie here made me wonder.

I naturally assumed the voice belonged to Luna.

There was no one else in the library who was usually in the library that would come up to me like this.

Of course, Riku and Ena were there too, but they usually came with Luna, never alone.

Rie casually took a seat in front of me and opened a book.

"Is it strange for me to come here? I've been here before, you know?"

Rie said, pouting her lips at me.

It wasn't her first time coming here, but it wasn't a common occurrence either.

I stared at Rie for a moment and then spoke.

"Do you have something to say?"

"Not really? Ah, there is something I'm curious about though."

Rie clapped her hands as if she had just thought of something.

I wasn't sure if she genuinely just thought of it or was pretending to, but it didn't really matter.

"What are you curious about?"

"What will become of the Saint now? She lost her eyesight, right?"

"Oh, Haruna?"

I had a somewhat private conversation with Haruna.

Although Rie was a good friend, I had a little apprehension about discussing possession-related matters.

Astina accepted it well, but Rie might not be so accepting.

"She said it doesn't matter. She knew she was going to lose her sight anyway."

Haruna had been living like a blind person all this time.

She lost her vision overnight, but since she had been mentally prepared for it, it wasn't a huge shock.

She had intended for this to happen.

Summoning his future self to this place.

The Saint said that it was a forbidden magic.

Crossing different timelines could cause physical damage like Haruna experienced, and in extreme cases, could cost one's life.

Haruna said that this was a rule of the world and she was punished for not adhering to it.

"Don't you have anything else to say?"

"What else?"

I told Rie almost everything except the fact that I'm a possessor.

I didn't share personal stories like the question she just asked, but I did thoroughly explain important matters, like Astina's death.

"It wasn't your idea to summon your future self, right? Plus the future might not go that way."

"That's true, but Haruna said it was necessary."

"Then, don't you owe her something in return?"

Rie stared intently at my expression.

However, I just tilted my head at the idea of compensation.

Haruna never brought up such a thing.

If she needs something, I can give it, but…

"If there's nothing, then forget it."

Seeing that I had no particular reaction, she smiled meaningfully and opened her book.

It seemed she came just to ask that question.

Perhaps she came to see me since I've been neglecting student council work lately due to my studies.

I looked at Rie focus on her book then started studying again.

After several hours of concentration,

"The library is closing now."

A librarian announced.

Upon hearing that, Rie and I began packing up our books.

"You're going to continue studying when you get back, right?"

Holding her bag, Rie asked me.

"I have to keep studying."

With finals approaching, there's no time to relax.

"Then how about taking a walk? Your head will hurt if you keep studying like this."

“…Hmm, okay."

She had a point.

Sitting in one place and studying all day can make it difficult to concentrate, and it's sometimes necessary to take a break.

That's also a reason why I came to the library.

With that, I walked with Rie toward the garden.

The path Rie led me to was somewhere I hadn't been to in a while.

"Ah…”

The place where I had said something peculiar to Luna.

The place where I left ambiguous words of confession, saying I would give her an answer later.

After saying that, I hadn't seen Luna's face recently.

Our overlapping classes were on break due to the upcoming exams.

"Hey, is there any food you want to eat or something?"

"Food I want to eat?"

While I was contemplating such thoughts, I raised my head in surprise at Rie's sudden question.

"You must have foods you're craving."

Naturally, when I thought of food I was craving, it was Korean cuisine.

Sometimes I would go to Professor Robert's favorite restaurant and enjoy a dish

called 'Cheonggukjang*.'

There were other dishes I was craving as well.

However, I couldn't say such things, so I was in a dilemma.

"Speaking of which, the food I had at the midterm camp was delicious. I loved those dishes."

It was the farewell dinner after finishing the camp.

Rie nodded in agreement.

"Oh, it was really good there. The Academy's cafeteria food never really suited my taste, so I didn't expect much, but I was satisfied there."

"Yeah, me too. The Academy's cafeteria doesn't quite work for me either."

Rie probably didn't enjoy the cafeteria food because she was used to high-end ingredients.

As for me, I wasn't a big fan of Western cuisine, so it didn't suit my taste.

But we did find common ground on this.

Rie continued with a satisfied smile and posed another question.

"So, anything you want or wish for?"

"Why are you suddenly asking me this?"

I narrowed my eyes, curious about Rie's sudden question.

"Well, is there really nothing like that?"

A thought came to mind after some pondering.

My birthday was coming up soon.

I didn't even know it last year, but now I had it in mind.

It was said to be nonsensical for a noble not to know their own birthday.

I remembered to avoid any odd behavior this year.

Seeing Rie's expression, I could somewhat guess her thoughts and chuckled lightly.

"Hmm… I don't really have materialistic desires or anything, so there's not much I want."

I gave an ambiguous answer to tease Rie a bit.

However, strangely enough, Rie smiled again, this time with a satisfied look.

Rie smiled and blurted out something strange.

"I know all about family ties and all… So, let's skip that…"

Family ties?

"What are you talking about?"

"Well, it's really nothing."

Rie raised her head and stared at me intently.

When our eyes met, Rie opened her mouth.

"Do you want to get engaged to me?"

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*Cheonggukjang is a type of Korean fermented soybean paste stew and uh that cliff LOL

CHAPTER 147
THE EVE OF THE STORM…! (4)

Always think rationally.

Decide with cold reason, not following the heart's desires.

This was always a phrase Rie kept close to her heart.

Lately, she hasn't been able to adhere to it well, but she always tried to apply it in her daily life.

So, Rie thought rationally.

What would happen if she married Rudy?

First… Rie herself liked him.

No, she shouldn’t jump to conclusions with such words.

She decided to think rationally, efficiently, and calculatedly.

Let's think about Rudy.

For starters, he wasn’t particularly tall.

A height around the mid-170 cm.

Average.

However, when she saw the future version of Rudy, he seemed taller than he is now.

Probably around 180 cm…

Among adult men, that was considered on the taller side.

And when considering his face… it was decent, not bad.

That meant the genes he'd pass onto their children wouldn't be bad either.

Now, let's consider other aspects.

Rudy's family is the Astria family, the largest ducal family in the empire.

Could there be a better family in the empire?

Of course, as the leader of the noble faction, they stood on the opposite side of Rie, who would become the Empress.

Depending on the perspective, they could be star-crossed lovers.

But it's also an opportunity to strengthen the empire.

The current successor of the Astria family, Ian, is hostile to the emperor.

He showed an even more hostile attitude than the current head of the Astria family.

But Rudy is different.

His actions so far and his words have been very friendly towards the emperor.

His attitude was so favorable that it made one wonder if he really grew up in the same house.

If that's the case, marrying Rudy would be politically advantageous as well.

If Rudy forges ties with the royal family, his political standing would elevate.

Considering Rudy's current skyrocketing reputation, if he properly forms a connection with the Royal family, he would be on par with Ian, if not surpass him.

In other words, it meant he wouldn't fall behind when competing for the position of the successor.

This marriage acts as a robust support for Rudy to inherit the duchy.

If Rudy inherits the Astria family, they would support the emperor, making it politically beneficial.

Also, it's important to consider if he has any debts or personal issues.

Although there were rumors that he lived a reckless life in the past, it was clear they were just baseless rumors.

The only other issue was the noticeable number of women around him, but that didn’t concern her.

She just had to hold onto him tightly.

She just had to ensure he couldn’t escape her charm.

Now, let's consider their life together as a married couple.

Is she compatible with him?

There wasn't much to say on that matter.

They were already in a good relationship, and their personalities seemed to match well.

Though they bickered from time to time, it wasn't genuine fighting; it was more like playful teasing.

Moreover, when deciding on most matters, their styles were so compatible that they resolved issues without much disagreement.

Some say that couples should have at least one major fight before getting married, but why?

There was no reason to fight.

That left only the question of personal preferences.

When you get married, you spend a lot of time together, so it's essential that tastes, especially in food and hobbies, match to some extent.

With that in mind, Rie went to find Rudy.

But, as expected, there were no issues.

"As I thought, we have no problems."

Their preferences in food, hobbies, and even their ways of thinking were similar.

It was a perfect match.

That's why Rie confidently asked:

"Do you want to get engaged to me?"

Beating around the bush or acting shy wasn't Rie's style.

She preferred a direct approach.

That's how Rie lived her life.

Rie stared intently at Rudy.

Rudy, with a surprised face, looked back at her.

Seeing his expression, Rie's face began to flush.

She realized the implications of what she had just said.

A confession.

Rie had confessed.

Marry me.

It wasn't uncommon for women to confess, but it still felt embarrassing in its own way.

Especially when they hadn't been dating or even discussed their feelings before.

"W-wait, I mean… we should talk about getting married…?"

Rie, with flustered gestures, tried to elaborate on what she meant.

Rudy was taken aback by Rie's reaction.

“Why are you panicking after saying all that?”

Rie couldn't disagree with that.

Rie thought that pushing forward without explaining in detail would be more effective than rambling on with explanations.

"W-well, a-anyway, let's… let's get engaged for now!"

Rie said, looking up at Rudy with her face turning even redder.

"N-no… how can you suddenly bring up something we've never even talked about before… and it's marriage."

“What's there to think about?”

Rie said, placing her hand on her chest and puffed it out with pride.

“A beautiful person like me is offering to become your wife! I have skills! And a good family background!”

But, despite her confident attitude, her face was turning crimson.

Rie shifted her gaze away, unable to maintain eye contact with Rudy.

She genuinely believed her confession was a logical decision.

But, after saying it out loud, she realized she acted more emotionally than she had intended.

Having already viewed Rudy through rose-colored glasses, Rie's thoughts weren't exactly logical or objective.

Rather, she had already come to a conclusion and was simply rationalizing her actions.

In reality, Rie had confessed to Rudy simply because she liked him.

"But… why are we talking about marriage all of a sudden?"

Rudy was taken aback and blushed with embarrassment.

"We're not kids, so why just date? Let's… let's just… get married,"

Rie said confidently at first, but her voice trailed off shyly at the mention of marriage.

"Let's… think about this later…"

"No! I want to hear your answer now!"

Rie firmly told Rudy.

"I have to go study, and it'll bother me if I don't know the answer now!"

Of course, regardless of Rudy's answer, Rie would be too distracted to study that night.

But she still wanted to hear his answer now.

Knowing Rudy's personality, it was obvious he wouldn't give a straightforward answer.

Lately, he seemed busy and lost in thought.

Rie knew that if she let this pass, the topic would drag on.

So she had to push forward.

It was advantageous to strike when the opponent appeared vulnerable.

This strategy was basic for Rie, who had studied the art of war.

However, one thing concerned her: What if Rudy rejected her outright?

Despite all her planning, she hadn't anticipated this possibility.

The usually assertive Rie quietly looked for signs in Rudy's expressions, then asked in a small voice,

"Um… do you… not like me?"

"No, no, I like you…”

Rudy replied quickly, hearing the uncertainty in Rie's voice.

Hearing that, Rie's eyes widened in surprise.

"Oh."

Rudy realized the implications of what he had just said.

He recognized the weight of his words and the potential consequences.

"Still… I mean, a sudden marriage…”

"Not marriage, but engagement."

Rie corrected him.

"We'll get married after graduation. That sounds good to you, right?"

"Well, yes, but beyond whether it's good or not—"

"The wedding can be a small, intimate one, with delicious food prepared just for us."

"That's not the point."

"Having a big wedding isn't really necessary, right?"

"W-well, that's true. But the issue is the very premise of marriage—"

Suddenly, Rie stepped closer and grabbed Rudy's tie.

Due to the height difference, Rudy had to tilt his head down.

Rie brought his head down to her level, looked straight into his eyes, and began to

speak.

"Just tell me. Do you like me or not?"

"Well… I do, but…”

"That's enough."

As Rudy tried to say something, Rie cut him off.

Rie moved closer and pressed her lips against Rudy's.

And so, under the dim moonlight, their lips met.

After some time had passed.

In Rie's room.

After kissing Rudy, Rie had retreated straight to her room.

She knew that if they had started talking, Rudy would have begun to ask all sorts of questions.

Not knowing what to say, she had simply bolted.

"Hehe… heh…”

Lying on her bed, Rie had a silly smile on her face.

Her confident demeanor had completely disappeared, leaving behind only an innocent girl.

Despite the approaching final exams, she lay on her bed, hugging her teddy bear tightly.

Rie continued to roll around her bed while hugging her teddy bear.

Late at night.

Robert was in an academy laboratory, going through various documents.

"Hmm…"

The papers were about Daemon, the necromancer of the rebels.

The central authority had identified and located everyone who had previously infiltrated the academy based on their appearances and names.

Jefrin, for instance, was quickly identified since he was already a famous wizard in the central region.

Of course, the odd thing was that Jefrin had originally been an old man*, but Robert didn't dwell on that.

The magic used was similar, and after analyzing the magical tool that Luna had stolen, it was found to be similar to the ones Jefrin had created.

There was a possibility he had an apprentice, but there were too many similarities between Jefrin's appearance when he was young and now.

People speculated that Aryandor had done something with time magic.

Perhaps through some agreement, Aryandor had granted Jefrin youth, and in return, Jefrin is helping Aryandor.

It was a plausible guess, especially since a wizard of Jefrin's caliber had suddenly joined the rebels.

However, traces of others were not easily found.

It was impossible to find out about Venderwood, who had been a slave, and Daemon, who hailed from the underground city Ephomos, left no trace after the disappearance of Ephomos.

Still, remnants of their past were present, and Robert could somewhat piece things together.

He continued reading the related documents.

"A sister…?"

Robert leaned back in his chair after reading the document.

"It's clear that he's up to something."

Robert reclined, creaking his chair.

"If such a person exists… I can't just sit still and wait anymore."

Robert stared at the drawer in front of him.

The drawer contained documents related to Levian, the owner of the magic book Luna had.

Robert had been waiting on an investigation regarding Levian's magic book, but there had been no progress on the matter lately due to his busy schedule.

"It's good timing. That guy owes me a favor…"

That guy.

He was referring to Luna.

He had recently taught Luna about mana stones and staff synthesis, so he felt she owed him a favor.

What Robert needed was information.

How the magic book came into Luna's possession.

And the events that happened before that.

Luna didn't know much when asked.

However, her father might know something.

Luna was quite young when she received the magic book.

He thought all of this needed to be investigated.

"That guy Rudy… that girl… If the three of us go…"

Robert muttered to himself roughly and immediately sat down in his chair.

Then he got up and began writing a document.

It was a document related to leave.

He planned to apply for leave during the summer vacation after the final exams.

"There shouldn't be any problems."

Robert thought so and continued writing the document.

CHAPTER 148
THE EVE OF THE STORM…! (5)

"Haaah…”

I let out a sigh, running my fingers over my lips.

This idiot.

I should have done something, whether it be accepting or rejecting.

I inwardly lamented, grabbing my head.

All of this was because of Luna.

Promising to answer Luna later, then getting engaged to Rie?

What a trashy move.

I couldn't study properly last night, nor could I sleep.

It was thrilling to think I had kissed Rie, but it was difficult to explain how things ended up like this.

Should I just accept this?

Or should I go there right now…

I shook my head.

I didn't have the confidence to reject.

"Seriously…”

Another sigh escaped me.

"Just give me some time to think…”

Suddenly confessing, and even sealing it with a kiss.

It was as shocking as a truck with broken brakes coming at you.

As I was wandering, lost in thought.

"Rudy Astria, why are you walking like that?"

Hearing my name, I turned my head.

“…Astina?"

In my line of sight, Astina was smiling.

"It's been a while."

Astina greeted me with a warm smile.

"Why are you… Wait, what?"

Astina was in her school uniform.

It didn't seem like she came for just a short visit.

"I'm allowed here, aren't I? Why are you making that expression?"

"I thought you were busy with something else… When did you arrive?"

"Just now. I saw you and called out."

Astina should have been undergoing her 3rd year practical period.

She was supposed to be receiving education as a successor.

I was expecting her around the start of the second semester.

Astina leaned slightly forward, narrowing her eyes.

"You must be busy with student council work and preparing for the finals. You have dark circles under your eyes."

"Yes… I guess so."

The reason for the dark circles was more because I didn't sleep properly last night.

But being busy was part of the reason, so she wasn't entirely wrong.

"So, how's your studying going?"

"It's not bad, just the usual."

"Then you must be working hard."

Astina said with a bright smile.

It made me happy to hear such a positive evaluation even when I said it was just the usual.

This feeling of complete trust wasn't bad.

"Where are the others?"

“…Others?"

"Luna and Rie. You're always with one of them, aren't you?"

"L-Luna and Rie…”

"Let's go see them. We can at least take a short break from studying for finals to see each other, right?"

I couldn't answer that.

How can I face Luna and Rie in this state?

Astina looked at me with scrutiny.

“…What have you done?"

"W-What do you mean… Why would you say that…”

"Hmm…”

Astina stroked her chin, pondering.

"Well, let's head to the student council for now."

"Yes… I understand."

Good.

The student council was a safer bet.

Rie had mentioned that she's been busy studying and hasn't been to the student council lately.

Luna rarely attended student council meetings, so the chances of them both being there were slim.

I headed towards the student council room with Astina.

Astina, returning to the academy after a long time, looked around with a pleasant smile.

"It feels familiar, even though it's only been half a year."

"Well, half a year isn't that long, after all."

"True, but it felt longer to me."

I chatted with Astina as we walked down the corridor.

Then, from afar.

"Oh, isn't that Rie?"

Spotting Rie at the end of the corridor, I gasped.

Why was she there?

"Rie."

Astina called Rie's name with a smile and approached her.

Rie turned her head at the sound of her name.

"Astina?"

She looked at Astina with wide eyes, as surprised as I was to see her.

Just as her expression began to soften into a friendly smile, our eyes met.

"Ah."

Rie looked more shocked seeing me than when she saw Astina.

And then…

"Rie?"

Rie quickly turned around.

She began to run as soon as she turned.

"Huh?"

Without looking back, Rie sprinted away into the distance.

Astina, stunned by the sight, looked at me.

Avoiding her gaze, I pretended to be clueless.

"What did you do?"

"I-I didn't do anything."

"…"

Astina looked at me suspiciously.

She soon turned her attention away and said,

"Alright, let's head to the student council."

We continued walking and soon arrived near the student council room.

Voices could be heard from inside.

"So… I think Rie has a better chance. She has a good status and they tease each other a lot."

"You think? But I feel Rudy Astria might prefer Luna. Just from watching Rudy…"

It was an odd conversation.

Why were they discussing this?

Astina, listening at the door, turned her head.

"Oh… What an interesting conversation. Rudy Astria?"

Her eyes were sharp.

Astina wore an expression I'd never seen before.

She gritted her teeth, glaring at me.

"I, really… I didn't do anything…"

It wasn't true that I didn't do anything.

I brought up the topic first to Luna.

The issue was that it was between me, Rie, and Luna.

So why were other people talking about it?

Astina, with a fierce expression, opened the student council office door.

"Whoa…"

"Who's…?"

Inside, there were Kuhn, Emily… and even Locke.

I'd heard Kuhn and Emily's voices from outside, but I hadn't known Locke was there too.

Upon seeing Astina, Locke's eyes widened.

“…Hello."

Locke greeted Astina politely.

Astina gave a smirk and nodded.

Her smirk held the fierceness I'd seen earlier.

The atmosphere was so tense, it felt like walking on thin ice.

Any outcry wouldn't have been surprising.

"Who, who are you…?"

Kuhn asked Astina with a confused look.

Anyone would be taken aback if a stranger showed such hostility.

I followed Astina into the student council office.

"Oh, Rudy…?"

"Ah."

Emily and Kuhn were visibly shocked upon seeing me.

Of course they would be.

They were in the middle of conversation.

They probably never imagined I'd suddenly appear.

Considering both Rie and I had mentioned we might not visit the student council for a while.

"Guys, greet Astina."

I said, glancing sternly at them.

Both Emily and Kuhn avoided my gaze, looking around uneasily.

Their wandering eyes finally settled on one person.

Locke.

They looked at the silent Locke as if pleading for help.

Noticing Emily and Kuhn's cues, Locke carefully spoke.

“…Did you perhaps hear?"

"Hmm… What are you talking about?"

"Ah."

Though her words suggested ignorance, Astina's gaze turned ice-cold.

Locke quickly deduced the situation.

"Astina, it's a pleasure to meet you, but I have other matters to attend to. I need to urgently meet a professor who's called for me."

Normally, Locke wasn't very talkative, but today, he spoke rapidly and at length.

"It's curious how, as soon as I arrive, you suddenly have something urgent?"

Astina looked at Locke, her head tilted, as if intrigued.

"It was something I had planned to do. I just dropped by to help some juniors. Now, I must…”

"Lo… Locke?"

Both Kuhn and Emily desperately called after the swiftly departing Locke.

Ignoring their calls, Locke disappeared like the wind.

“…Hmm. If they're gone, then so be it."

“…Ah, hello. My name is Kuhn…”

"I'm Emily, a first-year student. I'm not from the student council… I just came to help with some work…”

Kuhn and Emily hesitated on how to greet Astina.

It was understandable.

They already knew about Astina.

After all, they had occasionally asked questions about her to me and Rie.

We had described her as a good and charismatic person.

But seeing Astina now, she exuded even more charisma than before.

The two first-year students were too overawed to show their spirit.

It wasn't that they had done anything seriously wrong, but they had been talking about the student council president behind her back, which must have felt a bit unsettling.

In this situation, seeing Astina made them even more terrified.

Astina alternately looked at the two, who were losing their composure.

"The main instigator seems to have already run away… So, it's settled."

Astina relaxed her gaze and gave a gentle smile.

"Yes, I'm Astina Persia."

Seeing her expression, Kuhn and Emily seemed to relax.

It appeared they concluded she wouldn't cause them any trouble.

I knew Astina's personality well.

Such an expression meant…

"Alright."

Astina walked over and sat down in the president's chair.

"So, what were you two talking about?"

Emily and Kuhn's faces turned pale.

"It's like leaving a fish store to a cat."

Astina sighed.

Not that she thought she should be neglecting her heir studies and sticking around the academy.

Studying to be the successor was necessary.

What was more frustrating was Rudy, who stood confidently.

He seemed to be giving off an air of innocence, as if he had done nothing wrong.

He wasn't entirely wrong.

The two had debated whether Rudy suited Rie or Luna.

The problem was that such a conversation had taken place.

There was no reason for such a conversation to happen.

No smoke without fire.

Astina was certain that something had happened.

Especially the incident where Rie ran away just now.

Her face looked happy when she saw Astina.

Which meant, after seeing Rudy behind her, Rie chose to flee.

Astina assessed the situation coolly.

She had spent a long time away from Rudy.

They were in different grades, so they didn't spend much time together.

This couldn't continue.

Rudy was so oblivious that she had let things slide.

She hadn't anticipated the situation developing this way.

"Rudy, what are you doing after the finals?"

Astina turned her head and looked at Rudy beside her.

"Nothing special."

"Then clear your schedule."

"What time?"

"Let's have a meal."

Astina said that and was about to leave the student council room.

Something suddenly came to her mind.

Rudy's last birthday party.

Astina turned around and glared at Rudy menacingly.

"If you bring everyone like last time… I don't know what I might do."

"Oh, understood…"

Emily, who was next to them, widened her eyes in surprise.

Turning her head to look at Kuhn, she saw that he too had a shocked expression.

The two exchanged glances, thinking,

'T-There's no way… right?'

'T-That couldn't be.'

The two felt uneasy.

CHAPTER 149
THE EVE OF THE STORM…! (6)

The shining sunlight.

Rather than a pleasant feeling, it gave a strong sense of summer.

It was a scorching sun, enough to make one's skin feel hot.

This meant that summer vacation was approaching.

Before vacation, there's something every student must face.

Final exams.

A time most students dread.

Although students prayed for it to never come, such wishes rarely come true.

That day eventually arrived.

Despite the scorching heat, the students were studying diligently.

This year's first and second-year students were exceptional, and their hard work created an atmosphere of academic enthusiasm.

As everyone worked hard, the day of the final exam finally came.

While most students, tired from studying through the hot night, dragged themselves to the exam, there was someone who walked with a bright smile.

"Hmm~ Hmm~."

Rie walked with a smile, weaving through the hot sun rays.

She left the dormitory, crossed the sunlit garden, and headed towards the main

building.

Although there was some distance between the dormitory and the main building, Rie never lost her smile.

She was even humming a tune.

Despite having studied all night and not getting proper sleep, Rie was surprisingly energetic.

This level of enthusiasm was rare for her.

She found the intense sunlight pleasant and the chirping of birds around her felt like soothing music.

"The weather is nice~."

Indeed, the weather was nice.

The floating clouds and the shining sun felt wonderful, even if it was a hot day.

The heat didn't bother her.

"Now, I just have to do well in the exam."

Rie grinned, muttering to herself.

The weather was perfect, and she was in great condition.

Now, all that remained was to showcase her skills.

However, there was a problem.

Rie hadn't properly studied for this exam.

While studying and right up until falling asleep, Rie's mind wandered.

She thought it was foolish and embarrassing, but she couldn't stop her daydreaming.

Those daydreams scattered her focus.

She couldn't hold her pen properly while studying and she couldn't sleep well either.

Normally, such distractions would frustrate her, but for some reason, she constantly found herself smiling.

Even now.

She might not have studied properly, but she was still smiling.

As Rie continued walking with that smile, she glanced into a nearby classroom.

"Oh?"

It was Rudy's exam room.

Rie took a brief peek inside.

Faces were visible from inside the classroom.

It was Rudy.

"Ah…"

Upon seeing his face, her face started to turn red.

She had been thinking a lot about Rudy, but lately, she had been avoiding him.

She wanted to approach him, tease him, and chat with him, but it was difficult to approach him.

Was it because of the imaginations she had at night?

Whenever she saw him, her face would flush.

Rie clenched her fists.

She couldn't continue like this.

Also, today was Rudy's birthday.

She wanted to wish him a happy birthday and suggest having a meal after the exam.

Rie began to step forward but then stopped in her tracks.

“…Should I just talk to him after the exam?"

It was just a few minutes before the exam.

If she suddenly talked to him, it might disrupt Rudy's concentration.

Although she thought it was important to have a meal together, the exam was more important.

Rie stared intently at the back of Rudy's head but turned her head away.

"I can tell him later."

"Phew…!"

I'm in great condition today.

I slept well, and everything I studied was clearly etched in my mind.

I could recite everything as if reading from a book.

My research, the battles I fought, and the things I studied on my own are all swirling around in my mind as knowledge.

I was fully prepared.

"I'll do it. I'll be the top student."

I muttered to myself, reaffirming my determination.

Leaving the dormitory, I walked while going over what I had studied.

The students around me were all carrying notebooks or studying materials.

Everyone was working hard.

But I was confident.

I put in a tremendous amount of effort.

Although Rie's sudden confession had distracted me, I quickly pulled myself together.

I can worry about that after the final exam.

Afterwards, I can…

Thud—

Suddenly, a gloomy man brushed past my shoulder.

"…?"

I looked around, confused.

Instead of apologizing, he just walked on.

"What was that?"

I was irritated, but not particularly angry.

I couldn't let my mind wander in a place like this.

I needed to focus again.

I must concentrate on the final exam.

“…But, he seemed familiar."

A man with inconspicuous black hair.

He was already far ahead, so I couldn't see him clearly.

However, he reminded me of someone.

“…Evan?"

There weren't many with black hair.

One of them was Evan.

"No way, it can't be him."

I shook my head.

Although I hadn't seen him lately, that wasn't the Evan I knew.

The Evan I knew was someone who focused and worked hard in everything he did.

He wasn't someone with such a gloomy atmosphere.

"Never mind."

I went back to reviewing my studies while heading towards the exam room.

"Then, let's start the test."

Professor Robert announced at the front of the examination room.

It felt somewhat odd seeing Robert standing at the front.

Usually, it was someone more serious, but now it was Robert, who had always had a rather casual demeanor.

I'm getting nervous.

My hands were tingling from the anxiety.

"Phew…”

As I exhaled to calm my nerves, someone touched my shoulder.

It was Robert.

As he passed by, he patted my shoulder reassuringly, as if encouraging me to do my

best.

I found his gesture surprising but comforting.

It was just like him.

“Let's do this…”

I muttered to myself, soft enough for no one else to hear, and began going through the exam paper.

"The exam is now over."

Robert's voice echoed in the classroom.

I rested my head on the desk.

I wasn't sure if I did well or not.

I had been so focused that I lost track of time and didn't realize how quickly it had passed.

But I was confident that I answered every question.

As soon as I finished reviewing my answers, the test ended.

All my tension was gone, and I felt drained.

"Everyone, enjoy your summer vacation."

Robert said as he prepared to leave the classroom.

“Oh.”

He stopped on his way out and looked at me.

"Rudy Astria, come to my office tomorrow morning."

“…Yes?"

I raised my head in confusion.

"I have something for you to do."

Something to do?

I couldn't think of anything Robert would ask me to do.

"What do you mean by that?"

I asked him, lifting my head to meet his gaze.

"We'll talk about it tomorrow. For now, just go and rest."

“But if you tell me to rest without…”

Before I could push further, Robert gestured behind me with a nod of his head.

“Hmm?”

Behind?

I turned to find all the students looking outside.

Outside the window, there was a woman.

Knock, knock—

She was tapping on the window from the outside.

"Ah, Astina?"

I looked at her in surprise.

We were on the 4th floor.

A height that could be deadly if an ordinary person were to fall.

So it was natural for people around to be surprised when she was outside the window.

As I approached to open the window, Astina smiled.

"Why are you suddenly outside…"

As I opened the window, Astina grabbed my hand.

"Let's go."

"What?"

Astina pulled my arm and pulled me towards the outside.

I could see the ground below.

The ground far below.

I looked back at Astina.

"No, what, what is this? Astina, I…"

"It's fine. I'll use magic."

Astina smiled and channeled her mana.

"Ah."

Suddenly, her expression changed.

"Let's just go like this."

"Huh?"

Astina suddenly lifted me, as if embracing a princess.

"No… What are you doing?"

"Food."

Astina chuckled.

"Didn't we decide to go eat?"

Well, going to eat is fine, but…

Why like this?

"Ugh…!"

With me in her arms, Astina soared into the air.

Although I'm a man and Astina is a woman…

What in the world is she doing?

"If we exit through the main gate, there'll be too many interferences."

"So, if we eat together…!!!! Ahhhhh!!!!"

As I tried to argue, Astina began flying at an incredible speed.

"We'll talk about the rest while we eat."

Luna hurried her steps.

The place she was rushing to right after the exam:

The classroom where Rudy was.

Until now, she had been waiting for Rudy.

Since he promised to give an answer, she thought she could just wait.

But she couldn't just wait for an answer indefinitely.

She'd been busy with research and studies, and Rudy was also busy, so they hadn’t seen each other much.

"Today…! I have to go see him!"

Today was Rudy's birthday.

The answer is one thing, and the birthday is another.

As his friend, she should at least celebrate it.

Excited at the thought of seeing Rudy's face after so long, Luna hurried to the classroom where Rudy had taken his exam.

Arriving at the classroom where Rudy had his test…

"Hmm?"

"Huh?"

Luna and Rie ran into each other.

Luna tensed up.

Rie.

According to Ena, she was the top person to be wary of.

She met such a person in front of Rudy's classroom.

'Did… Did I come a bit late…?'

Luna flinched when she saw Rie.

'Right, right. Rie is a friend! A friend!'

Luna hid her surprised expression and smiled.

"Rie, what brings you here?"

"Ah, well…"

Rie looked at Luna with a troubled expression.

But then, her face changed.

A confident expression…!

"I came to see Rudy!"

Luna stepped back, startled by her declaration.

She was so direct…

In response, Luna clenched her fists.

"Oh, really? I came to see Rudy too."

Luna stated confidently.

'Right, there's no need to back down!'

Luna and Rie exchanged glances, each full of bravado.

It was as if they were sizing each other up; both stood tall, shoulders back.

Neither felt inferior to the other.

They didn't know about each other's affairs, so it was only natural.

"Um… Ah…”

Then, murmurs of confusion arose from around them.

For a while, the two exchanged glances before gradually coming to their senses.

The test had ended, and people were milling around.

Since they were posturing at the entrance of the classroom, people couldn't pass by.

"Ah… I'm sorry. Uh…”

"Oh, ah…”

Rie and Luna stepped aside to let others pass.

"Shall we go inside?"

"Yeah, let's."

Gone were their confident demeanors; now they both spoke cautiously.

They entered the classroom.

"Huh?"

"What?"

As they entered the classroom, they both made bewildered expressions at the same time.

Rudy was not there.

The students hadn't left yet.

But Rudy was nowhere to be found.

They would have surely seen him leave since they were right outside the classroom.

"Where did he go?"

"What's going on?"

They looked around the classroom, confused.

CHAPTER 150
THE EVE OF THE STORM…! (7)

"Where is this…?"

The place Astina had brought Rudy to was her room.

"Didn't you say we were going for a meal?"

"Yes, we came to eat."

Astina had two concerns while making plans for a meal with Rudy.

The first was what to do with Luna and Rie.

She didn't want to bring them along like last time.

Weren't Luna and Rie the ones who were always with him when she wasn't around?

Astina had a desire to have Rudy all to herself.

That's why she thought of having the meal not in a public restaurant, but in the privacy of her room, where Luna and Rie would never suspect.

Who would think to have a meal in a dorm room on one's birthday?

Astina decided on the location and began preparations.

The rooms for seniors in the dormitory were quite spacious.

Large enough to accommodate a big dining table.

Astina asked people to bring a dining table into her room.

Her second concern was about the food.

She could have prepared a regular meal, but she didn't want to.

She wanted to prepare something memorable and special.

The problem was that it wasn't easy to prepare something special with food.

If she made something unique, it might not suit Rudy's taste.

But if she prepared just delicious food, it wouldn't fit the criterion of 'special'.

After much thought, Astina came to a conclusion.

Why not prepare the food she saw in Rudy's dream?

Astina had entered Rudy's dream and visited a wedding hall.

There was a buffet at the wedding venue, with dozens of dishes.

After finishing a conversation with an elder, Astina had asked if it wouldn't be a problem to eat a little bit of the food.

Astina didn't taste all the dishes but sampled a few.

She tried to recreate those dishes from her memory, both in taste and appearance.

It wasn't easy.

She didn't know the ingredients used and couldn't be sure if the flavors were accurate.

Then she remembered the restaurant in front of the academy that Robert frequented.

It was a restaurant that served bean paste stew.

A dish that Rudy was unusually obsessed with, a dish Astina had never seen in her life.

She speculated that it might be related to the food from Rudy's world.

So Astina sought advice from the grandmother who was the owner of that restaurant.

"Alright, I'll prepare a few dishes for you. Oh, and tell that Robert fellow to pay his tab. That jerk owes me a lot of money."

Thanks to the elderly lady's generous help, Astina's plan proceeded smoothly.

She couldn't fill the table solely with dishes from Rudy's world, so she combined a few delicious regular dishes, dishes she researched from Rudy's world, and dishes prepared by the elderly lady, resulting in a rich and varied menu.

"Take a seat."

Astina reached out her hand to Rudy and spoke.

"I've prepared some food. I'm not sure if it'll suit your taste."

"It doesn't matter. I'm not picky."

Even though he said that, his face didn't seem too hopeful.

"Come in."

As Astina spoke, the door to the dormitory opened, and the food was brought in from outside.

"…?"

Upon seeing the dishes, Rudy widened his eyes in disbelief.

He couldn't trust his eyes.

Not just his eyes.

The familiar aroma wasn't something he expected in a place like this.

"I tried to prepare dishes you might like. That one is 'Jeyuk Bokkeum', a stir-fried pork dish, and there's 'Japchae', a dish you seemed to like at the buffet, and over there, 'Dwaeji Galbi', that's pork ribs…"

Astina listed the names of dishes she had heard from Rudy or remembered from the grandmother.

"How did you…?"

Rudy stared at Astina, utterly surprised.

"Didn't I tell you not to bring the others?"

Astina smiled.

The others wouldn't understand these strange dishes, not knowing Rudy's background.

This was a special event only Astina could prepare, and it gave her a reason to be alone with him.

"Now, let's eat."

Rudy looked at Astina with touched eyes.

In truth, Rudy had done a lot of research trying to recreate these dishes.

However, finding similar ingredients was a challenge, and there wasn't much information available.

Even if he knew how these dishes should taste, he was unfamiliar with this world's ingredients.

He had even asked the grandmother at the restaurant…

-Choose from the restaurant menu! Why are you making this old lady work more? Once that Robert pays his debts, I'll do it! Bother your master for me!

The grandmother grumbled and refused.

The reason she had honored Astina's request was actually because of Rudy.

-You're getting this for that little Astria kid, right?"

The reason the old lady at the restaurant turned down Rudy wasn't due to laziness but her health.

She couldn't stand for long periods, so she could only cook simple dishes.

However, for Rudy's birthday, she decided to show off her skills.

"Thank you… I'll enjoy the meal."

"Yes, eat well."

Astina nodded with a proud smile.

Meanwhile.

"Hey, where is he?"

"Where could he have gone?"

Luna and Rie.

The two had formed an alliance to search for the missing Rudy.

Together, they scoured the school.

Starting from the student council room to the professors' labs.

While rummaging through the labs, they discovered something.

"Rudy? Astina took him," Robert said.

Rie and Luna exchanged surprised glances.

"I knew Astina was here, but how did she take him?"

Robert didn't provide a direct answer to that.

If they were to find out that she had claimed Rudy first using magic, he didn't know

what these two would do.

Until now, it had been a cute love squabble, but using magic would escalate it into a potentially bloody conflict.

"Anyway, you should leave. I'm going home since I'm done here."

Robert said, gesturing towards the door.

"Yes… Thank you."

"Goodbye."

"Oh, Luna Railer,"

Robert called out just as they were about to leave.

"Help me tomorrow. I have some work."

"Tomorrow…?"

Luna tilted her head, a bit confused.

She didn’t have any specific plans.

"Aren't you on leave tomorrow, Professor?"

Luna asked.

She remembered seeing Robert's name on the list of professors on leave.

If he was starting his vacation tomorrow, there would be no reason for him to come to the academy.

Yet, he said he had work to do tomorrow, which confused her.

Robert looked at Luna, who had her doubts.

"I'm heading to the Railer territory tomorrow. I need you to guide me."

"You're coming to our territory, Professor? If you come unannounced…"

"I'm just dropping by. No need for any formalities. Just guide me."

"But, so suddenly…"

Luna wasn't sure how to respond.

'Then… what about Rudy…!'

Luna felt a strong urge to protest to Robert.

If she went to her territory, Rie and Astina would be left with Rudy at the academy.

Anything could happen.

Seeing her hesitation, Robert glanced at Rie.

'I better not mention Rudy Astria now.'

Robert had initially intended to call Rudy to accompany him with Luna tomorrow.

Rudy had no idea, but Robert knew that Rudy would go if he asked him to, considering Rudy's personality.

Robert hadn't planned on keeping it a secret.

He had intended to discuss it after the exams, but Astina got there first.

If Rudy left, Astina would definitely follow, just as she had today.

If Rudy and Luna went together, Rie would undoubtedly want to join as well, which complicated things.

"Just do as I say. Think of it as a repayment for helping you with the mana stone synthesis."

"…Okay, I understand."

Luna replied, her face downcast.

She couldn't even celebrate Rudy's birthday and now she would be separated from him.

Her shoulders slumped.

'Professor Robert… '

She cursed Professor Robert internally.

Though the curse would turn into overwhelming gratitude the next day.

“Whew!”

Rudy let out a satisfied chuckle, patting his belly.

It had been a long time since he had eaten so happily and felt so good.

“That was delicious. Thank you so much."

"It's your birthday, so I had to do something special."

Astina said with a smile.

“If you ever want to eat this again, just let me know. I know all the recipes, so I can ask the family chef to make it anytime.”

“The family chef?”

“Who else, besides someone from our family, could prepare such dishes? The chef is usually at the academy, so just tell me whenever you want to eat."

“Astina…!”

Astina had thought long and hard about how to win over Rudy.

Usually, they said the best way to woo a man was through looks.

However, that was for ordinary men.

Rudy Astria was different.

If he had been an ordinary guy, he would have surely been smitten with Luna or Rie, given they were some of the most beautiful girls in the academy.

So, what should she do?

Astina decided to captivate Rudy's palate.

Win over his taste buds then win over his heart.

That was Astina's plan.

Astina, with her smile, opened her mouth to speak.

“More importantly, tell me about the Saint and the future.”

“Oh.”

Astina had come to the academy early not just for Rudy's birthday, but also to discuss the future.

About Saint Haruna and the events to come.

Astina only had a rough idea of these things, so the doubts in her mind hadn't disappeared completely.

“Understood.”

Rudy nodded, his expression turning slightly serious.

“So, Astina, you've discovered that the Saint has some relationship with dimensions, right?”

“Yes?”

“The reason I came here is because of the former Saint, Beatrice.”

“Beatrice?”

Upon hearing about the former Saint, Astina tilted her head in confusion.

“Do you know when former Saint Beatrice died?”

“…Wasn't it around the time the current Saint took her position?”

“Yes, it was about a year before I came."

About a year before Rudy entered the academy.

Saint Beatrice had died under mysterious circumstances, and Haruna, who had been designated as her successor, took her place.

Despite the Saint's death, the church didn't do anything big.

They merely held a funeral and did not investigate the mysterious death.

People were suspicious and protested, but the church remained silent.

Eventually, as time passed, the incident was forgotten.

“That incident wasn’t buried by the church.”

“What?”

“Former Saint Beatrice personally buried it.”

“Why would she do that?”

“Did you hear that the Saint has lost her vision?”

“You told me about it.”

“Yes, she lost her sight as the price for summoning my future self across dimensions.”

“Oh… So, by summoning you here…? But the timing doesn't add up?”

“A year before I took over this body…”

Rudy let out an awkward laugh.

“Actually, around that time… That's when I started to learn about this world."

“What?”

The timing was impeccable.

The moment Rudy, in his original world, encountered this world through a game, and the date of Beatrice's death.

“The price for summoning me across dimensions. The price for letting my other-dimensional self know about this world. For that, the former Saint paid with her life.”

CHAPTER 151
THE EVE OF THE STORM…! (8)

"Haruna, please take care of things here. I'm sorry for going ahead like this."

These were Beatrice's last words.

Dimensional magic.

The ways to use this magic were diverse.

Seeing the future, turning back time, observing other worlds, or visiting them.

It was truly a miracle that made the impossible possible.

However, every miracle has its price.

That day, Haruna lost the most precious person to her.

The one who raised her, instilled values in her.

To Haruna, that person was Beatrice.

She wanted to stop her.

To ask her not to leave, to stay.

To stay together and find another way.

At these words, Beatrice shook her head.

"It's my responsibility for what happened. I believe you can manage on your own, Haruna."

Beatrice disappeared, leaving Haruna alone.

The lone Haruna resolved to carry on Beatrice's will.

To aid Rudy Astria, whom Beatrice had brought into the world…

"To stop Aryandor…"

Haruna muttered to herself.

"Aryandor…"

"He didn't reveal his exact intentions."

At Rudy's words, Astina nodded.

"The good news is that Aryandor can no longer see the future."

"He can't see the future?"

Rudy thought for a moment before speaking.

"Didn't I explain a bit about dimensional magic?"

"About space and time magic merging?"

"Yes, but it's more of an advanced combined magic."

"Advanced combined?"

Astina tilted her head in confusion.

Seeing her reaction, Rudy continued.

"In my case, I came from a different dimension, right?"

"Yes?"

"While Aryandor can see all timelines, he can't see the one I came from. Even if it's time magic, if it's related to space, he can't see it. The issue is that space magic is

somewhat similar."

"Hmm… that's complicated."

Astina held her chin, pondering.

Space and time.

The barrier between them.

For Astina, it was an unexplored domain.

"That's all I found out for now."

"I see, Aryandor and… Beatrice…"

"Haruna told me not to worry about it, but wouldn't it be better to find out?"

"Yes, I'll look into it on my end."

Astina smiled.

"More importantly, how was the future you saw?"

"…It's not a pleasant story to hear."

Even Rudy didn't know much about the future.

He only knew the cause and the result.

"Astina."

"Hmm?"

Rudy looked at Astina with a straight face.

He carefully opened his mouth.

"Please, don't be surprised and listen…"

"Don't be surprised?"

Astina tilted her head.

What's so surprising about talking about the future?

It's a completely different future.

It's just something to acknowledge and move on from. There's no reason to be overly concerned.

"Go on."

Astina said to Rudy with a relaxed demeanor.

"The future I saw was a world that was already halfway destroyed."

"Oh, is that so?"

"In that world, I was very powerful, but I couldn't protect anyone."

"Right, right."

Rudy took a quick glance around.

Even after telling her this much, the lack of reaction from Astina was puzzling.

Rudy continued.

"I took others' abilities and grew without caring about my surroundings. I only believed in becoming stronger."

"Quite the opposite of now."

"But despite that, future me still failed."

Astina smirked, seemingly unimpressed.

"If you've seen that future, you just need to do better from now on."

"That's not the issue."

Rudy said seriously.

"The reason I changed so suddenly is… after you, Astina, died during this winter break."

“…What?"

Upon hearing this, Astina's expression darkened momentarily but then brightened up.

"After my death? Why? Why did you change just because I died? What… were we to each other?"

"What…?"

Rudy looked utterly confused at Astina's question.

He assumed she would take the news of her impending death seriously, but she seemed even more cheerful than usual, leaving him confused.

Astina pondered for a moment.

"If I died… and the current Rudy changed completely…”

She was deep in thought.

The death of a close person is naturally shocking.

But, for someone to change completely due to that death is a bit strange.

Such a change doesn't happen unless it's the death of a truly close individual.

So then…

Astina half rose from her seat, leaned on the table, and stretched towards Rudy.

"By any chance… were we in a romantic relationship?"

"Pardon?"

"Did we date or… oh."

Astina stopped herself quickly and regained her composure.

She cleared her throat and sat back down.

"Ahem… no, forget it. I was just curious."

"I didn't see the future in great detail, so… I wouldn't know about that. I can't look into it again either…"

Rudy gave an awkward smile.

"Anyway… I need to prepare well if I'm going to die. So, Rudy, have some tea…"

BANG—

As Astina was about to say something, a loud noise echoed from the door.

"…Would you like some tea?"

Ignoring the noise, Astina smiled.

Rudy glanced between the door and Astina.

"Um… what was that noise?"

"Don't worry about it. Now, let's have tea…"

BANG BANG BANG—

"…Let me prepare it."

"Maybe you should check outside…"

Ignoring Rudy's suggestion, Astina calmly went to prepare the tea.

"Astina!!! I know he's in there!!! Rudy!!"

Rie's voice came from outside.

Astina paused from preparing the tea and shot a glance towards the door.

“Sigh… How did she find out?”

“Senior…?”

Astina walked to the door and opened it.

Sure enough, outside stood Rie and Luna.

Behind Rie was Sylph.

“What's going on?”

“Is Rudy inside?”

Rie boldly asked.

Astina looked at Sylph.

"Isn't it against the rules to use a spirit to look inside dorm rooms? Did the rules change while I was away?”

“Regardless! Rudy's in there, isn't he?!”

Astina gazed cheekily at Rie.

“He’s not.”

“He is!”

Astina and Rie bickered like children.

“Ahaha…”

Luna, standing to the side, chuckled awkwardly and tried to peek inside.

Astina quickly moved in front of Luna.

“That's an invasion of privacy. Why are you trying to look inside?”

“Then give me Rudy!”

“What does it matter if Rudy is here? He's just where he wants to be.”

Rie glared straight at Astina, fuming.

“Uh… Rudy~. Are you in there?”

Luna called softly into the room.

“Um… I’m here…”

“He’s not.”

Just as Rudy tried to respond from inside, Astina loudly drowned out his voice.

“He is!!!”

“Astina…”

Contrary to her usual dignified demeanor, Astina was acting quite childish.

Realizing this, she sighed.

“Yes, Rudy is here. But he’s here because he 'wants to be' in this 'place', with the 'person' he 'wants to be with'. What business is it of yours? Do you even have the right to behave like this?”

Astina emphasized that Rudy was with her of his own volition.

Of course, Rudy had been somewhat coerced by Astina to come, but the truth wasn't important.

She just needed to deflate these overzealous kids.

“We do care! We have every right!”

Rie shouted back at Astina.

Astina frowned.

"What?"

Rie clenched her fist tightly.

Her face turned redder, and she hung her head.

Then she shouted loudly.

"He's, he's my husband! I can worry about what my husband is doing, can't I?"

“…What?"

"Huh?"

Both Luna and Astina looked at Rie with bewildered expressions.

Rudy, with a greatly surprised face, rushed towards the door.

"No, no. Hey! Uh…”

Astina and Luna stared coldly at Rudy.

"Rudy Astria. What is all this about?"

"Rudy? What's that supposed to mean?"

Sensing the tense atmosphere, Rudy took a step back.

"Hey! What are you talking about…”

"He even took my first kiss!!!"

"Rudy?????"

"Rudy Astria?"

Under the cold gazes of Luna and Astina, Rudy's face turned pale blue.

"Haah…”

When the commotion subsided,

Astina remained alone in her room, deep in thought.

She never imagined Rie would confess like that.

She hadn't expected the proud Rie to take the initiative.

Fortunately, it wasn't a set in stone yet.

From Rudy's explanation, it didn't feel like he had accepted her confession.

After all, Rie had blurted out about their engagement and then ran away.

Still, the situation was dangerous.

"Damn…”

She hadn't expected such an event after being away for just half a year.

It was brushed off casually now, but later on, it might become an established fact.

"I can't just stand by."

Astina clenched her fist.

With a sigh, Astina murmured and then chuckled.

"He feels quite different from before."

The old Rudy Astria felt like he was from a different world.

He was swept up in major events, always at the center of it all.

However, his usual demeanor was quite contrasting.

He seemed more like a spectator.

A spectator observing how situations around him unfolded.

And that Rudy, who was like a spectator, always jumped into action during crucial moments.

"A game, he said?"

She had a vague understanding of it after hearing Rudy's story earlier.

Experiences and stories from another medium, not reality.

They were mere characters in that narrative.

However, Rudy now felt a bit different.

The feeling of him being distant and strange had vanished.

He began to genuinely look at and acknowledge his surroundings.

Was it because he had seen his old world within a dream?

Or because Rie had sincerely confessed?

Maybe due to several other events that occurred before.

It was hard to pinpoint the exact reason.

All she knew was that the once passive Rudy was no more.

The walls that stood between them had already crumbled, and now whoever took the initiative would be the owner.

"If I had known this would happen, I would have made my move first."

Astina muttered to herself.

Still, Astina believed she had a chance.

Rudy from the future had clearly said he changed because of her.

This held some significance.

It meant she had enough influence on Rudy to change him.

It signified that Rudy valued her to that extent.

"Let's give it a shot."

Astina said with a confident smile.

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